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Title: Thorley Weir

Author: E. F. Benson

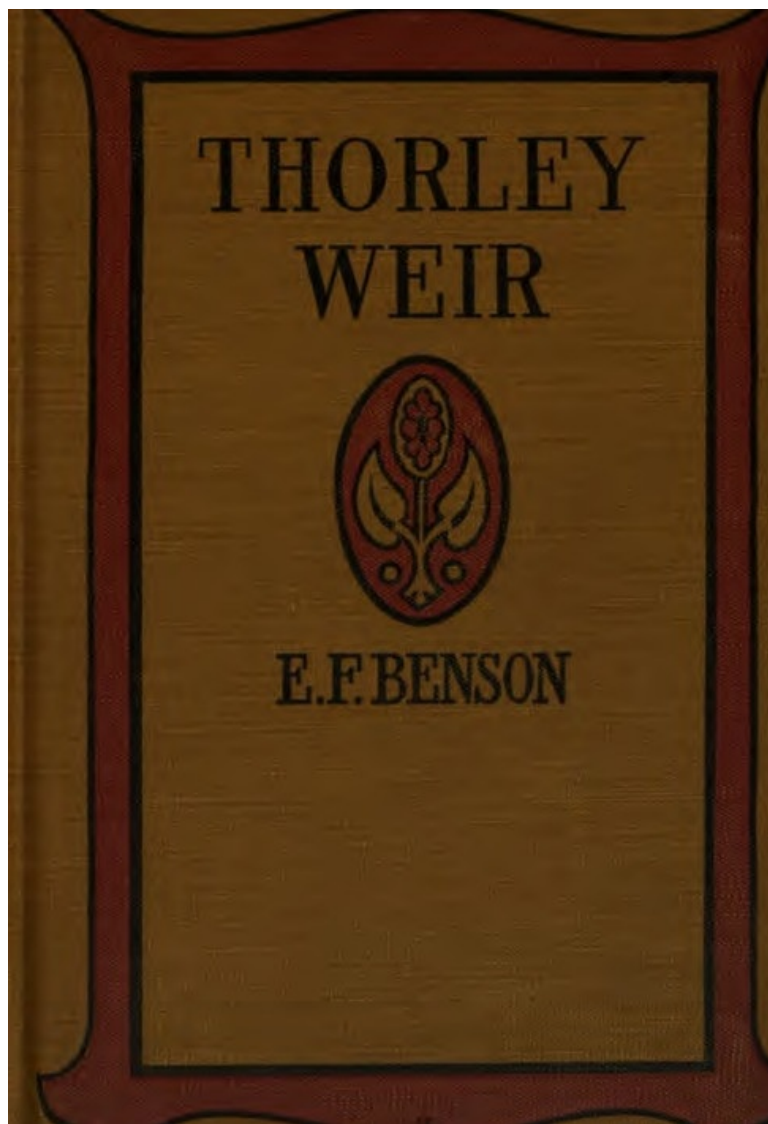
Release date: July 12, 2014 [EBook #46258]

Language: English

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THORLEY WEIR

BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE IMAGE IN THE SAND," "PAUL," ETC.

PHILADELPHIA & LONDON

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY

1913

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CHAPTER I.

The hottest day of all days in the hottest June of all Junes was beginning to abate its burning, and the inhabitants of close-packed cities and their perspiring congregations cherished the hope that before long some semblance of briskness might return into the ardent streets. Providence, it would appear, justly resentful at the long-continued complaints that hot summers were altogether a thing of the past, had determined to show that something could still be done in that line, but this rejoinder, humorous at first, had long ago ceased to amuse. From morning till night for the last six weeks an unveiled sun had shed a terrific ray on to the baked pavements and reverberating house-walls, but to-day had beaten all previous records, and a solemn glee pervaded the meteorological offices, the reports of which seemed to claim a sort of proprietary credit in the readings of their incredible thermometers.

Under these conditions it was with a sigh of relief that Arthur Craddock subsided into the corner-seat of a first-class smoking carriage at Paddington, finding that it was smoking, figuratively speaking, in less specialized a sense than that intended by the railway-company, for it had been standing for an hour or two in the sun outside the station. But he had clear notions about the risk of chill even on so hot a day, and when the train moved out from the dusky glass vault, he drew up the window beside which he sat, for it was impossible for him to take a seat with his back to the direction of progress, since the sight of receding landscape always made him feel slightly unwell. But, as he was alone in his carriage, there was no reason why he should not refresh his clay-coloured face with a mist of wall-flower scent which he squirted delicately over his forehead and closed eyes from a bottle in his silver-mounted dressing-case. Then he pulled down all the blinds in his carriage and sitting quite still in this restorative gloom indulged in pleasant anticipations.

He was a very large stout person, wearing his hair, which was beginning to grow thin, though no hint of greyness invaded its sleek blackness, conspicuously long. Round his ears and the back of his head it was still thick, but it no longer felt capable of growth on the top of his high peaked head, and in consequence he brushed it from the territories on the left side of his head over the top of his bald skull, and mingled the extremities of these locks with those that grew on the territories on the right of his head. It might thus be hoped that short-sighted and unobservant persons would come to the gratifying conclusion that the thatch was complete. He wore a small reddish moustache which in the centre of his immense colourless face might remind a Biblical beholder of the Burning Bush in the desert of Sin, for he looked vaguely debauched (which he was not) and overfed (which was probable to the verge of certainty). His hands, of which he was exceedingly proud, were small and white and plump; they were carefully manicured and decorated with a couple of rings, each set with a large cabochon stone. When, as now, they were not otherwise occupied, he habitually used one of them to caress the side of this desert of Sin, as if to make sure that no whisker was surreptitiously sprouting there. In dress, though he was certainly old enough to know better, he affected the contemporary style of a fashionable young man, and his brown flannel suit had evidently the benediction of the tailor fresh upon it. His tie, in which was pinned a remarkably fine pearl, was slightly more vivid than his suit, but of the same colour as his socks, a smooth two inches of which appeared below his turned-up trousers, and his shirt had a stripe of the same colour as his tie. No watch-chain glittered on the amplitude where it would naturally repose, but on his left wrist he wore a narrow band of gold braid with a lady's watch set in it. A white straw hat and brown shoes were the alpha and omega of his costume.

Though his face was singularly unwrinkled, except for rather heavy bags of loose skin below his eyes, it was quite evident that Arthur Craddock had left youth far behind him, but it would have been an imprudent man who would have wagered as to his ability to guess it within the limits of four or five years, for his corpulence was of the somewhat gross sort that may come early to an inactive man, in whose sedentary day dinner is something of an event. But it would not have required a very subtle physiognomist to conjecture for him an alert and athletic mind. His small grey eyes, which were unsurmounted by any hint of eyebrow, were, though a little red and moist, of a singular intensity in focus, and as active in poise and dart as a hovering dragon-fly, while even in repose they wore a notably watchful and observant look. His hands, too, which afforded him so constant a gratification, were undeniably the hands of an artist, long-fingered in proportion to the palms, and taper-nailed. Artist he was, too, to the very tips of those pink and shining triumphs of the manicurist, and though he neither painted nor played nor set forth on adventures in romance or poetry, his judgment and perception in all such achievements on the part of others was a marvel of unerring instinct, and was solidly based on an unrivalled knowledge of the arts. Not only, too, could he appreciate and condemn with faultless acumen, but side by side with that gift, and totally distinct from it, he had an astonishing *flair* for perceiving what the public would appreciate, and just as he was seldom at fault in true artistic judgment, so also was he an accurate appraiser of the money-earning value of play or picture. He was, it may be stated, not unconnected with the artistic columns of the daily press, and the frequent articles he contributed to three leading papers on pictures, concerts and plays, were often masterpieces of criticism, while at other times and for other reasons he plentifully belauded work in which, though he might artistically despise it, he was financially interested. His critical powers and the practical use to which he put them in purchases and in these penetrating paragraphs had proved most remunerative to him during these last fifteen or twenty years, and he had already laid by a very comfortable provision for his declining days, which he sincerely hoped were as yet very far off. He was fond of money, and, very wisely, had not the least objection to spending it in works of art which gave him pleasure, especially when his judgment told him that they would go up in

value. Then, if a picture or a bronze could be sold again at a much higher price than that which he paid for it, he would part with it without any agony of reluctance. These transactions were conducted unobtrusively and it occurred to nobody to call him a dealer. If such a supposition ever occurred to himself, he put it from him with the utmost promptitude. But every quarter he paid the rent of Thistleton's Gallery in Bond Street, from which so many of the English masters set forth on their voyage to the United States.

His immediate anticipations, as has been already remarked, were pleasurable, for the Thames-side house at Thorley where he was to dine and sleep would certainly be a refreshing exchange from the baking airlessness of town. It was true that there would be nothing special in the way of dinner to look forward to, for his host Philip Wroughton was a penurious dyspeptic of long but hypochondriacal standing, and Arthur Craddock, made wise by a previous experience, had directed his valet to take with him certain palatable and nutritious biscuits in case dinner proved to be not only plain in quality but deficient in quantity. But there were two attractions which he was sure of finding there, each of which more than compensated the certain short-comings of the table. These were Philip Wroughton's daughter and Philip Wroughton's Reynolds: briefly, he hoped to possess himself of both.

It was impossible to decide between the rival excellencies of these. The Reynolds picture was exquisite: it represented his host's great-grandmother. But Joyce Wroughton his host's daughter might have sat in person for it, and the artist would have congratulated himself on having so supremely caught the frank charm and vigour of her beauty. More than most of the master's portraits it set forth a breezy and glorious vitality; it was as if Diana and an Amazon had been ancestresses to the sitter, in so swift and active a poise the slim white-clad figure paused with head turned and beckoning hand and smile before it passed up the glade of dark-foliaged trees behind it. How often had Craddock seen Joyce Wroughton in just such a momentary attitude as she swung across the lawn from her punting on the river, and turned to call her collies lest they should enter the tent where her father sat and disturb him at his employment of doing nothing at all. Craddock, sluggish of blood and corpulent of limb, found a charm of wonderful potency in the girl's lithe and athletic youth, and his own subtle intricate-weaving mind admired hardly less the serenity and simplicity of hers, which seemed as untroubled and unmorbid as that which he would conjecture for some white Hellenic marble. It cannot be truthfully stated that in the common acceptance of the word he was in love with her, but he immensely admired her, and, being of the age when a man says to himself that if he intends to marry he must without delay put out from the harbour of his bachelorhood, he had decided to set his sails. She, only just twenty years of age, was more than a quarter of a century his junior, but this seemed to him a perfectly satisfactory chronology, since for full twenty years more her beauty would but ripen and develop.

His desire to possess himself of the Reynolds portrait was in a sense more altruistic, since he did not propose to keep it himself. He was prepared to offer to the present owner of it what would certainly appear to one not conversant with salesrooms a very generous price, and he was also prepared to take a far more generous price for it himself from an American friend who was victim to a trans-Atlantic ambition to possess a dozen portraits by this master. He scarcely knew a picture from a statue, but he wanted pictures, and Craddock in previous transactions with him had learned not to be shy of asking enormous sums for them, since Mr. William P. Ward's comment was invariable, laconic and satisfactory. "I'm sure I'm very much indebted to you," was all he said, and proceeded to discharge his indebtedness.

Craddock's precautions with regard to the sun that beat on the carriage windows were quite successful, and he felt cool and presentable when he was shown into this riverside house and out again onto the lawn that bordered the Thames where tea was laid under the big plane tree that shaded a drowsy area of cool green. Joyce, inimitable save for the foreshadowing Sir Joshua, rose to receive him, forgetting to turn off the water from the urn which was ministering to the teapot. Upon which a thin hand came out of an encompassing chair, and a rather fretful voice said:

"The tea will be drowned, Joyce. Oh, is that Mr. Craddock? Charmed."

Having saved the tea from drowning, Philip Wroughton gave Craddock a sufficiently cordial welcome. He did not rise from his basket chair, but extended a welcoming hand. He had a footstool to keep his feet from any risk of damp from the scorched and arid grass, and a thin plaid shawl was laid across his knees, as a preventative of miasmatic humours reaching those joints. In person he was a wizen bird-eyed little man, fleshless and hollow-cheeked, and grey-haired, and by the side of his daughter he looked like a dried Normandy pippin compared to a fresh apple, sun-tinted and vivid-skinned. Beside him, chiefly concealed from view by the scarlet sunshade which cast a red glow on to her face, sat his mother, old Lady Crowborough, who was by far the most juvenile of any company in which she found herself. Not being on speaking terms with her elder son (though she spoke about him a good deal) she stayed with Philip whenever she found it convenient, and gave him a great deal of good advice, which he seldom acted upon. She delighted in her age, which she habitually exaggerated, and had now for several years said that she was ninety, though as a matter of fact she would not attain that agreeable age for several years yet. She was remarkable for her shrewdness, her memory and her health, and wore a rather girlish and simple costume with a flapping linen sun-bonnet. Time, that inexorable accountant, seemed to have passed over her page, and her face was still marvellously soft and unwrinkled, and her sight and hearing were yet acute and undimmed. Arthur Craddock had not expected to find her here, and he was not sure that the discovery pleased him, for she always produced in him a sensation of being detected.

Philip Wroughton continued his low-voiced and languid phrases of welcome.

"Charmed to see you," he said. "You know my mother, do you not? It is good of you to come down and see us in our retreat. I, with my wretched health, as you know, cannot leave home, and Joyce really prefers the river and her dogs and perhaps the society of her poor old father to the distractions of town. Eh, Joyce?"

Joyce might or might not have endorsed the filial sentiments thus attributed to her, but her opportunity of doing so was snatched from her by her grandmother who endorsed none of these things.

"It's all stuff and nonsense about your health, Philip," she said. "You would be as strong as me if you only would put your medicine bottles into the grate, and eat good nourishing food, instead of the slops you stuff yourself with. And as for Joyce preferring to spend her time with you, instead of dancing and flirting with all the agreeable young fellows in London, you know quite well that it's you who keep her mewed up here to carry your cushions and pour out your medicines and put up your umbrella."

Joyce interrupted this recital of menial duties with a laugh.

"Granny, darling," she said, "how many lumps of sugar?"

"Three if they're decent big ones," said Lady Crowborough with decision. "Tell us what's going on in town, Mr. Craddock."

Arthur Craddock habitually made himself agreeable when it was worth while, and here he had three persons whom he desired to stand well with—Philip Wroughton for the sake of the Reynolds, Joyce for her own sake, and Lady Crowborough for reasons of self-protection.

"A burning fiery furnace is going on in town, my dear lady," he said. "The heat has been a torture, and I only hope I have been expiating some crime. The worst of it is that I have searched my memory without any success for something I have done to deserve these flames. But I seem to have been almost priggishly virtuous. What do you think I can have done, Miss Joyce?"

Joyce put the three decent lumps into her grandmother's tea, and laughed again. She always felt a certain slight physical repulsion for this stout white man, though she recognised his agreeable qualities.

"Ah, how can I tell?" she said. "You have not made me your confessor."

Mr. Craddock remembered that he would probably not get very much dinner, and took a large soft bun with sugar on the top of it.

"I instantly offer you the post," he said, "though I can still think of nothing to confess. You will have a sinecure. And yet after all it was one's own choice to stop in town, and certainly there have been pleasant things going on. I suppose, too, that at this moment the keenness of my pleasure in sitting on this delicious lawn in the shade and coolness of your beautiful plane tree is enhanced by the contrast with the furnace I have escaped from. And will you take me out again in your punt after tea, as you did when I was here last? All the way down I have had a prospective vision of you looking like a Victory off some Greek frieze with your punt-pole, and of myself reclining on the cushions like—like a middle-aged but unintoxicated Silenus."

This speech, since not addressed to Lady Crowborough, was too lengthy for her taste.

"Nasty uncomfortable things are punts," she observed, "going crawling along with one person poking and fuddling away among the mud and eels at the bottom of the river, and dribbling the water from the pole over the other. Joyce made me go out with her yesterday, and one of her great dogs sat on my lap, and the other panted and slobbered over my frock, while the sun frizzled the marrow out of my bones. If I must go on the river, give me a motor-boat that takes you along instead of going backwards half the time."

"I think I shall not find it too chilly in the punt to-night, Joyce," said her father, "if I take the shawl that is next thickest to the one I have here. Or perhaps it would be more prudent to take both. Will you see to that, my dear, when you have finished tea, and tell them also to put dinner a quarter of an hour later. Then I shall be able to rest for a little after we get in. Let us start very soon. Bring Mr. Craddock one of my shawls, too; he will be likely to find it chilly after the heat of town. A Shetland wool shawl, Mr. Craddock, I find keeps one warm without any feeling of weight."

Lady Crowborough's impatience at her son's hygienic precautions fizzed and spurted again at this.

"And bring me my cough-drops, Joyce," she said, "and my goloshes, and my little fur-cape, and a digestive pill, and my liver-mixture. And don't forget to take some cotton wool, to put in your ears, and the eye-lotion. Lord save us, Philip! You and your Shetland shawls!"

"I envy you your robustness, dear mother," said he. "I only wish you had bequeathed me more of it."

Lady Crowborough had finished tea, and accompanied Joyce on her errand of Shetland shawls, thus leaving the two men together.

"Joyce will bring the punt around in ten minutes," said her father, "and in the interval I shall be glad to have a chat with you, Mr. Craddock. I have been considering the question of selling the Reynolds, if you remember our talk when you were last here, and I have come to the conclusion that it is really my duty to do so. I feel that I ought to spend next winter in some warm and sunny climate, where I may have a chance of recovering some measure of my ruined health. But that of

course would cost money, and my wretched poverty puts it out of the question for me, unless I can sell some such possession. Joyce, too, poor girl, will enjoy a greater stir and gaiety than I can give her here. There is little enough of it in her life, though I know she finds compensation from its absence in the sedulous care with which she insists on looking after me. I dare say there will not be many more years of invalid-nursing before her. All I can do is to make them as little tedious as may be. Indeed, it is chiefly for her sake that I contemplate the sale of this picture."

He paused a moment and lit a curiously-smelling cigarette which counteracted a tendency to hay-fever. Like many people he was strangely credulous about his own statements, and came to believe them almost as soon as they were made. Indeed, on this occasion, before his cigarette was well alight, he fancied that in part at any rate his plans of wintering in some warm climate had been made for Joyce's sake.

"I think you mentioned some number of pounds you thought you could get me for my great-grandmother's picture," he said. "Five thousand? Was that the amount? I have no head for figures. Yes. And an American, was it not? I hate the thought of my picture going to America but poor men like me must not mind being kicked and plundered by the golden West. Probably it would be hung up in some *abattoir*, where oxen are driven in at one end, and tinned meat taken out at the other. And for once my mother agrees with my determination to sell it. She says that I cannot afford to have such a large cheque hanging framed in my study."

Arthur Craddock did not find much difficulty in sorting the grain from the husk, in this very characteristic speech. But he wisely treated it all as grain.

"I know well your solicitude for Miss Joyce's happiness," he said. "And I need not tell you how much it honours you. But with regard to the future home of your delightful picture I can assure you that there is no *abattoir* awaiting it. Mr. Ward has half a dozen Reynolds already, and some very notable examples among them. And, as I told you, I think there is no doubt he would give five thousand for it."

He caressed the side of his face, and finding no disconcerting whisker there, wondered how much he would actually venture to charge Mr. Ward for the picture.

"In fact I offer you five thousand for it here and now," he said. "Ah, here is Miss Joyce in her punt coming for us."

Philip Wroughton dismissed this insignificant interruption.

"Then call to her, Mr. Craddock," he said, "if you will be so good and tell her we shall be ready in five minutes. I cannot raise my voice above the ordinary tone of speech without excruciating pain. She will take a little turn in her punt, and come back for us. You will excuse me if I shut my ears when you shout; a loud noise tears my nerves to ribands."

Arthur Craddock got up.

"I will go and tell her," he said.

"So good of you: I am ashamed to trouble you," said Wroughton, not moving.

He walked down to the edge of the lawn, where was the landing-stage.

"We are talking business, Miss Joyce," he said, "so will you come back for us in five minutes. You have just stepped off some Greek frieze of the best period, let me tell you. I long to recline like a teetotal Silenus of the worst period on those cushions. In five minutes, then?"

Joyce leaned towards him on her punt-pole and spoke low.

"Oh, Mr. Craddock," she said. "Are you talking about the Reynolds? Father told me he was thinking of selling it. Do persuade him not to. I am so fond of it."

She gave him a little friendly nod and smile.

"Do try," she said. "Yes, I will come back in five minutes. There's a swans' nest among the reeds down there, and I will just go to see if the cygnets are hatched out yet."

Wroughton looked languidly at him on his return.

"Joyce has a ridiculous affection for that portrait," he said, "and I have a reasonable affection for it. I can't afford to look at it: I am far more in need of a suitable winter climate than of any work of art. Yet sometimes I wish that these Pactolus-people had left us alone."

This was not a strictly logical attitude, for it was obviously possible to refuse the offer, and leave the Pactolus-people alone. Nothing more than an opportunity had been offered him, of which he was free to take advantage or not, just as he chose. As for Craddock, he felt himself advantageously placed, for if he upheld Joyce's wish, he would ingratiate himself with her, while if the sale took place, he would reap an extremely handsome profit himself. For the moment the spell of the riverside Diana was the most potent.

"I can understand Miss Joyce's feeling," he said, "and yours also, when you wish that the Pactolus-people as you so rightly call them had left you alone. I respect those feelings, I share and endorse them. So let us discuss the question no further. I will tell my friend that I cannot induce you to part with your picture. No doubt he will find other owners not so sensitive and fine as you and Miss Joyce. Of course he will be disappointed, but equally of course I gave him to understand that I could in no way promise success in the enterprise."

Even as he spoke the balance wavered. He could tell Joyce that he had urged her father not to part with his picture, and her gratitude would be earned, and he knew that he wanted that more

than he wanted to gratify her by his success. Thus it was satisfactory to find that he had not disturbed the stability of Wroughton's determination, and his profit was safe also.

"Ah, that is all very well for you," said Wroughton, "with your robust health and your ignorance of what it means to be so poor that you cannot afford the alleviation which would make life tolerable. Beggars cannot afford to be so fine. Even Joyce does not know what I suffer in this miserable swamp during the winter months. But I am convinced she cannot have her father and the picture with her, for I am sure I should never survive another winter here."

His thin peaked face grew soft with self-pity, which was the most poignant emotion that ever penetrated to his mind.

"She would bitterly reproach herself," he went on, "if after I am gone, she conjectured that I might have been spared to her a little longer if I had been able to spend the winter months in a climate less injurious to me. She does not really know how ill I am, for of course I do not speak to her about that. I want to spare her all the anxiety I can, and in speaking to her of my project of spending the winter in some sunny climate, in Egypt or on the Riviera, I have laid stress only on the pleasure that such a visit will give her. No, no, Mr. Craddock, my poor Joyce and I must put our pride in our pocket; indeed there is nothing else there. I will close with your American friend's offer: my mind is made up. Naturally I should want a good copy of the picture made for me without cost to myself. It might be possible for you in your great kindness to arrange that for me. You might perhaps make it part of the condition of sale: five thousand pounds and a good copy."

Craddock waved this aside. He had delicately disposed of another bun.

"That is easily arranged," he said, wiping his fingers that were a little sticky with the sugar on his fine cambric handkerchief. "I feel sure I can guarantee his acceptance of your terms."

Philip Wroughton coughed gently once or twice. He always said that questions concerning money were distasteful to him. It is quite true that they were so, when they concerned his parting with it.

"And am I right in supposing that you would expect whatever the usual commission happens to be?" he asked. "If so, shall I pay it, or your friend?"

Craddock interrupted him with the promptitude born of horror at such a suggestion.

"I beg you not to hurt my feelings by proposing anything of the kind," he said.

Philip Wroughton instantly and with apologies withdrew his inhumanity.

By this time Joyce had returned from her expedition to the swans' nest and was waiting for them. She had already put into the punt a selection of grey Shetland shawls, with a quantity of cushions, and the task of making her father quite secure and comfortable next demanded all her patience and serenity. But she had to make one more expedition to the house to get his white umbrella, for the heat of the sun not yet set might easily penetrate the black one which he had brought with him. He needed also a fly-whisk in case the midges became troublesome, a binocular glass, and the very careful disposition of cushions so that no draught could conceivably come through the cane back against which he reclined. Then, when he was quite settled, Craddock got in, and Joyce pushed out into the stream leaving two pairs of pathetic dogs' eyes wistfully regarding her from the bank. But it was impossible to take Huz and Buz, his brother, when her father was in the punt, for they fidgeted him on these hot days with their panting, and could not be relied on to keep perfectly and permanently motionless.

Joyce, as was usual with her, was bareheaded, and was clad in a very simple home-made skirt of butcher's blue much stained with water and bleached with sun, and a white flannel blouse the arms of which she had rolled up to above her elbows; but Craddock, who was a skilled appreciator with regard to female apparel, would not have had her change her really elementary garments for the most sumptuous and glittering fabrics. In general, he entirely believed that a woman's beauty is enhanced by the splendour of her attire, and saw the value of satin and tiaras. But there was something so completely satisfying and suitable in this rough river-dress that he would not have added any embellishment to it, nor have expunged a single water-stain or sun-bleach. The girl's superb slim figure, divine in the elasticity of its adolescence, now bending to her stroke, now rigidly erect again as she trailed her pole back through the frilled water, stood out in the simplicity of Attic relief with its plain white and blue against the reflected greens and browns which the trees and shady places cast onto the polished mirror of the water. Her arms bare to above the elbow showed the full roundness and soft, slim strength of her beautiful limbs, and for the most part, except when she turned at the end of her stroke, her face was in profile to him, giving him the short, straight nose of the Reynolds picture, the fine mouth with generous underlip a little drooping, and the firm oval of the curve from chin to ear. Here in the stern, while she made these magnificent sweeps and curtsies with her punt-pole, were sitting her father and himself, and he had no need to glance at Mr. Wroughton, or to think consciously of himself with his obese and middle-aged figure in order to remind himself of the glorious contrast between the passengers and the splendour of their long-limbed conductress. She was Thames, she was June, she was the enchanted incarnation of all that was immortally young and beautiful, and though naturally vain, he felt delighted to be part of her foil, to set her off more than any "silk and fine array" could have done. For the first time he hardly knew whether he did not admire the

Reynolds portrait so much because it was so like her. There was the same spirit of wind and woodland and sunshine and joyous serenity about it. The type was here incarnate, and he bathed his mind in it, washing off, temporarily at least, the merchandise and tittle-tattle of its normal environment. Surely this admiration of his touched ecstasy, touched love.

There soon came a turn in this sunny fluid reach of Thorley, and Mr. Wroughton, without imprudence, furling his white umbrella, and adjusted his binoculars for a languid survey of the shadowed river. On one side a wood of tall virginal beeches clad the hill-side down to the edge of the towing-path, and the huge curves of aspiring tree-tops climbed unbroken to the summit of the hill. A fringe of hawthorn-trees, cascades of red and white, bordered this fairyland of forest, and below the towing-path a strip of river-fed grasses and herbs of the water-side were fresh and feathery. Spires of meadow-sweet reared their stiff-stemmed umbrellas of cream-colour, and loosestrife pointed its mauve spires into the tranquil air. The dog-rose spread its maiden-hued face skywards, with defence of long-thorned shoots, and lovely sprays with half-opened chalices hung Narcissus-like above the tranquil tide. Below the water waved secret forests of river-weed, with darting fishes for birds in the drowned branches, that undulated in the stream, and here and there tall clumps of rushes with their dry brown blooms wagged and oscillated mysteriously to the twitchings of unseen currents. To the left the ground was low-lying in stretch of tree-bordered meadow, and from not far in front of them the sleepy murmur of Thorley weir sounded with the cool melodious thunder of its outpoured and renewed waters. Willows fringed the banks, and glimpses of meadow behind them, lying open to the level rays of the declining sun, shone with their rival sunlight of buttercup and luxuriant marsh marigold. Birds were busy among the bushes with supper, and resonant with even-song, and jubilant thrushes were rich with their rapturous and repeated phrases. And Arthur Craddock with his swift artistic sense, not too sophisticated for simplicity, saw with an appreciation that was almost tremulous how all this benediction of evening and bird-song and running water was reflected and focussed in the tall bending figure of this beautiful girl, and in her vigour and in the serenity of her brown level eyes. She was in tune with it, beating to its indwelling rhythm, a perfect human instrument in this harmony and orchestra of living things, part of it, thrilling to it, singing with it....

And the fact that he saw this so strongly, appreciated it so justly, measured the myriad miles he was distant from loving her. An infinite hair-breadth placed him further from love than is the remotest star from the revolving earth.

They glided up opposite a juncture of streams. To the right lay the main body of the river towards Thorley lock, to the left a minor stream hurried from the low-thundering weir. Joyce pushed strongly outwards on the right of the punt, and turned it with frill of protesting water into the narrower and swifter stream, willow-framed on both sides. Here there was shallower and more rapid water, that gleamed over bright gravel-beds, and even as they turned a king-fisher ashine with sapphire and turquoise wheeled like a jewelled boomerang close in front of them, giving a final hint of the gleaming romance and glory that lies so close below the surface of the most routined and rutted life. They made a sharp angle round a corner, and close in front of them was the grey spouting weir, and the deep pool below it, lucid with ropes and necklaces of foam and iridescent bubble. A long spit of land jutted out into the river and on it was a grey canvas tent.

Joyce had been punting on the right of the boat with her back to this, but just as they came opposite to it, the shifting current of the stream thrown across it by this spit of land made it advantageous to change the sides of her poling, and from close at hand she saw the tent and the presumed inhabitants thereof, two young men, one perhaps eighteen years old, the other some four or five years his senior. They were as suitably clad as she and more scantily, for a shirt and a pair of trousers apiece, without further decoration of tie or shoe or sock, was all that could be claimed for either of them. The younger was utterly intent on some elementary cooking-business over a spirit-lamp; the elder with brush and palette in hand was frowningly absorbed in a picture that stood on an easel in front of him. So close to the river-bank was the easel set, that it was impossible not to apprehend the vivid presentment that stood on it: there was the weir and the nude figure of a boy on the header-board in the act of springing from it into the water. Then at the moment when the punt was closest, the artist, hitherto so intent on his picture that the advent of the punt was as unnoticed by him as by the boy who bent over the spirit-lamp, looked away from his canvas and saw them. Thereat he attended no more to his work, but merely stared (rudely, if it had not been instinctively) at Joyce with young eager eyes, half-opened mouth, vivid, alert, and suitable to the romance of the river-side and the pulse of the beating world. It seemed right that he should be there; like Joyce and the willow-trees, he belonged to the picture that would have been incomplete without him, young and smooth-faced, and barefooted and bright-haired.

On the instant the cooking-boy spoke, high and querulously.

"Oh, Charles," he said, "this damned omelette won't do anything. It's a sort of degraded glue."

Joyce laughed before she knew she had laughed, with her eyes still on Charles. Indeed she hardly knew she laughed at all, any more than a child knows, who laughs for a reason as primal as the beat of the heart. The blood flows.... Then, still primally, she saw his responsive amusement, and as they laughed, a glance as fresh as the morning of the world passed between them. She had looked at him no longer than it took her to pull her punt-pole up to her side again, then turning her head, in obedience to the exigence of another stroke, she looked away from him. But it seemed to her that that one moment had been from everlasting. It was the only thing that concerned her, that meant anything.... And the strange fantastic moment was passed. Craddock's voice terminated it.

"Your glasses for a second, Mr. Wroughton," he said, and without waiting for verbal permission he snatched them up with a quickness of movement that was rare with him, and had one fleeting look at Charles' picture. The next stroke of the punt-pole took them round the spit of land into the bubble and foam of the bathing-pool below the weir.

Joyce skirted round this, keeping in shallow water and out of the current. A backwash of water made it unnecessary for her to exert herself further for a moment, and she turned full-face to the two men. Something within her, some indwelling beat of harmony with the simple and serene things of the world, made a smile, as unconscious as her laugh had been, to uncurl her lips.

"What a jolly time those two boys are having," she said. "I hope the omelette will cease to be degraded glue. And, Mr. Craddock, wasn't Charles—the cook called him Charles—wasn't Charles painting rather nicely? Did you see?"

Certainly Craddock had seen, though he wanted to see again, but it was her father who answered.

"I think we will turn and go home, Joyce," he said. "It will be chilly at sunset. What have you done with my second shawl?"

Joyce laid down the dripping punt-pole.

"Here it is," she said. "Will you have it over your shoulders or on your knees?"

The bows of the punt were caught by the weir-stream, and the boat swung swiftly round.

"Take care, Joyce," he cried. "You will have us swamped. And you should not put down your punt-pole in the boat. It has wetted me."

Joyce spread the second shawl over his knees, and tucked the edges of it round him.

"No, dear, it hasn't touched you," she said, "and we aren't going to be swamped."

She took up her pole again, and a couple of strokes sent them swiftly gliding down the rapid water. Next moment they were again opposite the tent; one boy was still stirring the deferred omelette, the artist with brush still suspended had his eyes fixed on their punt. Once again Joyce's glance met his, and once again Arthur Craddock picked up Wroughton's glasses, and got a longer look at the picture on the easel, before they floated out of range. He was even more impressed by this second glance; there was a vitality and a sureness about the work which was remarkable. For the moment the thought of the Reynolds, and even Joyce herself, blue and white with the background of feathery willow trees, was effaced from his mind. Certainly the boy could paint, and he was for ever on the look-out for those who could paint, more particularly if they were young and unknown. He felt certain he had never seen work by this young man before, for he could not have forgotten such distinctive handling. As certainly he would see artist and canvas again before he left Thorley. This was the sort of opportunity with which his quick unerring judgment was occasionally rewarded. There might be a bargain to be made here.

Philip Wroughton was in amazingly genial humour that night, and read them extracts about the climate of Egypt from a guide-book. He had quite an affecting and tender little scene with Joyce, in the presence of Arthur Craddock on the subject of the sale of the picture, and had told her with a little tremble of his voice that it was for her to choose whether she would part with the portrait or himself, according to the formula he had already employed in discussing the matter with Craddock. On this second repetition it had gained reality in his mind, and Joyce with her sweet indulgence for all that concerned her father did him the justice of recognizing that to him this tissue of imagination was of solid quality. Somehow the prospective loss of the picture, too, did not weigh heavily with her, for she was conscious of a sunlight of inward happiness which could not be clouded by any such event. She had no idea from whence it sprang, it seemed to be connected with no particular happening, but was like one of those hours of childhood which we remember all our lives when we were intensely and utterly happy for no definite reason. Never, too, had she seen her father more alive and alert, and he went so far as to drink nearly a whole glass of the bottle of champagne which he had opened for his guest, to wish prosperity and a happy home for the portrait. But, in this established imperfection of human things, he had slight qualms on the wisdom of this daring proceeding, and bade himself remember to take a little digestive dose as soon as dinner was over.

"With a good copy here in its old place," he said, "I have no doubt that we shall not really miss it. Joyce, my dear, these beans are not sufficiently cooked. And, Mr. Craddock, I hope you will arrange that the transaction shall be quite private. We, Joyce and I, do not want the fact that I have had to sell the picture publicly known."

Lady Crowborough gave a little shrill laugh at this, without explanation of her amusement.

"It shall not be spoken of at all," said Craddock, "nor of course will the picture be seen in London. It shall go straight from your house to Philadelphia. Why, even your servants need not know. The copy will one morning take the place of the original, which I will arrange shall not be moved until the copy is ready. I will get a copyist to do the work here, if that is agreeable to you. Mr. Ward naturally will want to see his picture before the purchase is complete, but you need not see him. He will call at a time convenient to yourself. But should you care to see him, you will find him a very agreeable fellow."

Mr. Wroughton held up his hand which was thin almost to transparency.

"No, spare me the sight of my executioner," he said.

"I don't know where you get all these fine feelings from," remarked his mother. "Not from my

side of the family. I'll see Mr. Ward for you, and see if I can't get him to buy some garnets of mine that I never wear. I shall like a month or two in Egypt with you, Philip."

"Too long a journey for you, mother, I am afraid," said Philip hastily.

"There! I knew you'd say something mean," said she, rising. "Well, I've finished my dinner, and I shall get to my Patience."

The night had fallen hot and starry and still, and though it was not to be expected that Mr. Wroughton should risk himself in the air after dinner, Craddock and Joyce at his suggestion strolled down to the river's edge in the gathering dusk. The even-song of birds was over, and bats wheeled in the darkening air, and moths hovered over the drowsy fragrance of the flower-beds. From somewhere not far away sounded the tinkle of a guitar accompanying some boyish tenor, and Joyce without thought, found herself wondering whether this was the voice of Charles of the unknown surname, or the anonymous fashioner of the omelette. The tune was tawdry enough, a number from some musical comedy, and though the performer had no particular skill either of finger or throat, the effect was young and fresh, and not in discord with the midsummer stillness. Something of the same impression was made on Arthur Craddock also, who listened with an indulgent smile on his big face that gleamed whitely in the faded day and dimness of stars.

"He does not know how to play or sing very much," he said, "but it is somehow agreeable though a little heart-rending to my middle-age. He is clearly quite young, his voice is unformed yet, and I should guess he is thinking of Her. Envidable young wretch! For though, Miss Joyce, we miserable ones go a thinking of one or another Her all our lives, they cease to think of us, just when we need them most."

There was considerable adroitness in this speech as a prelude to greater directness, and he looked at her out of his little grey eyes with some intentness. She seemed more Diana-like than ever in this grey glimmer of starlight: it really seemed possible that she would spring up from the earth to meet the tawny moon-disc that was even now just rising in the East, and charioteer it over the star-scattered fields of heaven. She seemed dressed for her part as Mistress of the Moon, all in white with a riband of silver in her bright hair.

"But what of us?" she said lightly. "Do not you men cease to think of us even before we are middle-aged?"

Suddenly it struck Craddock that no more heaven-sent opportunity for carrying out the second of the purposes that had brought him down here, could possibly be desired. He was in luck to-day, too: the business of the portrait had been carried through so smoothly, so easily. But immediately he became aware that he was not, in vulgar parlance, quite up to it. He needed support, he needed her father's consent, but above all he needed the imperative call, the hunger of the soul. Clearly, too, her words did not refer, however remotely, to herself and him, he felt that they were spoken quite impersonally. And immediately she changed the subject.

"I have to thank you," she said, "for trying to dissuade my father from selling the portrait. He told me you had suggested that he should not. That was kind of you."

He caressed the side of his face with the usual gratifying result.

"I found his mind was made up," he said, "though in accordance with your request I suggested he should not sell it. Always command me, Miss Joyce, and I will always fly on your quests. I am aware that I do not look particularly like a knight-errant, but there are motor-cars and railway-trains nowadays which transport us more swiftly and less hazardously than mettlesome chargers, especially if we can't ride."

He had again made himself an opening, but again he found when he came close that it was barricaded to him. But this time some hint of his intentions, though he could not manage to carry them into effect, was communicated to her, and conscious of them, and uncomfortable at them, she again changed the subject.

"Oh, I am not going to ask you to take the train to-night," she said. "The most I shall ask of you is that you play *béziq* with my father by and by. I play so badly that it is no fun for him. Hark, the singing is coming closer."

They had come to the landing-stage at the far end of the lawn, and looking up the tranquil lane of the river Joyce saw that the sound came from a Canadian canoe which was drifting downstream towards them. The boat itself was barely visible in the shadow of the trees: it was conjectured rather than seen by the outline of shirt-sleeves that outlined it, and it was on the further side of the stream. By this time the moon had swung clear to the horizon, and though the boat was still shadowed, Joyce and Craddock standing on the lawn were in the full white light. At the moment the musical comedy song came to an end, and the voice of some imprudent person from the canoe, forgetting the distinctness with which sound traverses water, spoke in a voice that was perfectly audible to Joyce, though not to Craddock.

"Charles, there's the girl of the punt and her fat white man," it observed.

Charles was more circumspect. His answer was a murmur quite inaudible, and instantly he thrummed his guitar again. The melody was new to Joyce, and though he might not have great skill in singing, he had a crisp enunciation, and the delicious old words were clearly audible:

"See the chariot at hand here of Love
Wherein my Lady rideth."

Louder and more distinct every moment, as the canoe drifted closer came the beautiful lyric. The

singer was not using more than half his voice, but as the distance between canoe and audience diminished, the light boyish tenor was sufficiently resonant to set the windless air a-quiver. Just as the canoe emerged into the blaze of moonlight opposite came the final stave, and the white-shirted singer sang from a full and open throat:

"Or have smelt o' the bud o' the briar?
Or the nard in the fire?
Or have tasted the bag of the bee?
O, so white, O, so soft, O, so sweet is she!"

The silence of the night shut down like the lid of a jewel-box. Then after a little while came the drip of a paddle, and the canoe grew small and dim in the distance down-stream.

"Those jolly boys again," said Joyce.

Arthur Craddock heaved a long sigh, horribly conscious of his years and riches, and Joyce heard the creak of his shirt-front.

"That young man has diplomatic gifts," he said. "It is clear that he intended to serenade you, and he chose the far side of the river, so as to make it seem that he had no intention of any kind. It is a reasonable supposition that if serenading was his object, and it certainly was, he might be supposed not to see you standing here. So he serenaded with the open throat. If I tried to do the same, which sorely tempts me, I should only convince you that I had not an open throat but a sore one. Nobody has ever heard me sing, not even when I was as young as that white shirted youth in the canoe. He will paddle back to his tent before long, unless you stay here visible in the moonlight, and dream steadily about you till morning."

Joyce laughed.

"Oh, what nonsense, Mr. Craddock," she said, knowing in the very secret place of her girl's heart that it was not nonsense at all. "Boats with guitars and singers go by every night, and often half the night. They can't all be serenading me."

"I cannot imagine why not. A Mormonism of serenading young men is not illegal. I would join them myself, Miss Joyce, if I could sing, and if I did not think that any Canadian canoe in which I embarked would instantly sink."

Philip Wroughton, in addition to the glass of champagne he had drunk at dinner permitted himself the further indulgence of sitting up for nearly an hour beyond his usual bedtime to talk to his guest and read more about the delectable climate of the Upper Nile. While Craddock and Joyce were out in the garden, a train of thoughts had been suggested to him by his very shrewd mother before she began her Patience, which he was preparing to indicate ever so lightly to that gentleman after Joyce had gone upstairs. "He's got your picture, Philip," said that observant lady, "and now he's after your daughter. Why don't you send Joyce up to town for a month, and give the girl a chance? You're a selfish fellow you know, like all Wroughtons." But she had not succeeded in provoking him to a retort, nor had she affected the independence of his own conclusions. It required no great perspicacity to see that Craddock was considerably attracted by the girl, and it seemed to her father that she might easily marry less suitably for him. She had led a very solitary and sequestered life with him, and he did not propose to alter his habits in order that she might come more in contact with the world. True, in this projected Egyptian winter she was likely to meet more young men than she had ever come across in her life before, but he could not imagine any one who would suit him (as if it was his own marriage that was in contemplation) better than Craddock. Philip found him quiet and deferential and agreeable, and since it was certainly necessary that Joyce and her husband (if she was permitted to marry) should be with him a good deal, these were favourable points. He detested young men with their high spirits and loud laughs and automatic digestions, and he did not for a moment intend to have such a one about the house. Furthermore Craddock was certainly very well off (Philip would have had a fit if he had known that he and his picture were in the act, so to speak, of enriching him more) and it was clearly desirable to have wealth about the house. Possibly some one more eligible might discover himself, but Philip had little difficulty in convincing himself that he would be failing in his duty towards his daughter if he did not let Craddock know that his attentions to Joyce were favourably regarded by her father. But if his meditations were stripped of the fabric of unrealities, until truth in bare austerity was laid open, it must be confessed that he planned Joyce's possible marriage with a single eye for his own comfort.

A game of *béziq* succeeded Craddock's stroll with Joyce and a cigarette with a whisky and soda consoled him for the withdrawal of the ladies.

"And you have positively to go up to town again to-morrow," said Philip. "Cannot we by any means persuade you to stay another night? You in your modesty have no idea what a refreshment it is to us in our retirement to get a whiff of air from the busy bustling world. Yes, I may say 'us,' for my dear little Joyce was so pleased at your coming. Would you not be more prudent to close that window? I am sure you are sitting in a draught."

This, of course, meant that Philip was, and Craddock did not misunderstand.

"I was saying that Joyce was so pleased," repeated her father.

"I ask nothing better than to please Miss Joyce," said Craddock.

"You do please her: I am sure of it. Dear Joyce! I know it cannot be long that I shall be able to give her a home. Her future continually occupies my thoughts. I daresay she will meet someone when we winter in Egypt who will attract her. She is not ill-looking, is she? I think there must be

many suitable men whom she would be disposed to regard not unfavourably. Yes, yes."

It was all spoken very softly and tunefully: the calm sunset of declining day seemed to brood over it. The effect was that Arthur Craddock got up and paced the room once or twice in silence.

"Will you give me your permission to ask Miss Joyce if she will make me the happiest of men?" he asked.

"My dear friend!" said Philip, with hand outstretched.

CHAPTER II.

Dawn was brightening in the sky though the sun was not yet risen when Charles Lathom awoke next morning in the tent by the river-side. Close by him in the narrow limits of their shelter his brother Reggie was lying on his back still fast asleep with mouth a little parted, a plume of tumbled hair falling over his forehead, and a bare brown arm and shoulder outside the sheet in which he was loosely wrapped. Late last night, after they had got back from their moonlit drift down the river, Reggie, who, to do him justice, had done all the paddling so as to leave Charles free to serenade, saw the propriety of one dip in the pool below the weir before bed, and had come back into the boat dripping and refreshed and glistening, and without further formality of drying, had curled himself up and gone to sleep with a mocking reference to the lady of the punt. The picture of him taking a header into the pool, now on the point of completion, leaned against the tent-side, and a couple of bags gaping open and vomiting clothes and brushes, and a box of provisions, the lid of which did duty for a table, completed the furniture of the tent. Charles got up quietly, so as not to disturb the sleeper, and went out into the clean dewy morning. The thickets behind their encampment were a-chirrup with the earliest bird-music of the day, and high up in the zenith a few wisps of cloud that had caught the sun not yet risen on the earth itself, had turned rosy with the dawn. The spouting of the weir made a bass for the staccato treble of the birds, but otherwise the stillness of night was not yet broken. Little ripples lapped at the side of the Canadian canoe drawn half out of the water onto a bank blue with forget-me-not, and a tangle of briar-rose with cataract of pink folded petals hung motionless over the water. Then with a sudden shout of awakened colour the first long level rays of the sun sped across the meadows, and with the sigh of the wind of dawn the world awoke.

The morning light was what Charles needed for his picture, but not less did he need his brother, for the painting of the braced shoulder-muscles of his arms as they pointed above his head for the imminent plunge. Sun and dappled shade from the trees that bounded the meadow just beside the weir fell onto his naked body, making here a splash of brilliant light, here a green stain of sunlight filtering through the translucent leaves, while his face and the side of his body seen almost in profile were brilliantly illuminated by the glint from the shining pool below him. But underneath these surface lights there had to be indicated the building and interlacement of the firm muscles and supple sinews of his body. He had all but finished them, he had all but recorded what he saw, but it was necessary that Reggie should stand for him just a little while more. Meantime, since it was still so early, and his brother still so profoundly dormant, there was a little more work to be done to the ecstatic dance of sunlight on the pool. Just at the edge the shadow of the wall of the weir lay over it, and it was deep brown with a skin of reflected blue from the sky, but a few yards out the sun kindled a galaxy of golden stars, flowers of twinkling and dazzling light.

He got his picture out of the tent, set it on its easel, and put a kettle of water on the spirit-lamp. It was still far too early to have breakfast, but a cup of tea brought presently to Reggie's bedside might tend to make him unresentful of being awakened when Charles found he could get on no further without him. So when this was ready, Charles rattled the sugar in its tin loud enough to wake not one only but seven sleepers, and Reggie sat up with a justifiable start.

"What the deuce——" he began.

"Sorry," said Charles. "I'm afraid I made rather a row. But I've made some tea, too. Have a cup?"

"Of course. Is it late?"

"Well, no, not very. I've been up some little time painting. But I can't get on any more without you!"

Reggie gave a great yawn.

"I suppose that means you want me to turn out, and stand with my arms up on that header-board. It's lucky I have the patience of an angel."

"Archangel," said Charles, fulsomely. "You've been a real brick about it."

"And will you get breakfast ready if I come now?"

"Yes, and I'll make both beds."

Reggie accordingly got up and glanced at the picture as he passed it on his way to the header-board.

"I suppose I am like a dappled frog, if you insist on it," he said, "but a devilish finely-made young fellow."

"Absolute Adonis," said Charles humbly. "Oh, Reggie, stand exactly like that as long as you

possibly can. That's exactly right."

The work went on in silence after this, for the modelling of muscle and flesh below this checker of light and shade and reflection was utterly absorbing to the artist. He had tried all ways of solving this subtle and complicated problem: once he had put in the curves and shadows of the tense muscles first, and painted the diaper of sun and shade on the top of it, but that made the skin thick and muddy in texture. Once he had mapped the sunlight and surface shadows first and overlaid them with the indicated muscles, but this seemed to turn the model inside out. Then only yesterday he had seen that the whole thing must be painted in together, laid on in broad brushfuls of thin paint, so that the luminousness and solidity should both be preserved, and this method was proving excitingly satisfactory. Often during this last week he had almost despaired of accomplishing that which he had set himself to do, but stronger than his despair was his absolute determination to record what he saw, not only what he knew to be there. It was impossible for his brother to hold this tiring pose for more than a couple of minutes, and often it was difficult to get its resumption accurately. But this morning Reggie seemed to fall or rather stretch himself into the correct position without effort, and Charles on his side knew that to-day he had the clear-seeing eye and the clever co-ordinating hand. For an hour of pose and rest Reggie stood there, and then Charles stepped a few yards away from his canvas, and stood a moment biting the end of his brush, and frowning as he looked from model to picture and back again. Then the frown cleared.

"Thanks most awfully, Reggie," he said. "It's done: good or bad, it's done."

Reggie gave a great shout, and disappeared altogether in the pool.

Charles made breakfast ready according to agreement, and the two sat for a while afterwards in the stupefaction of out-door content.

"This week has gone on wings," said Reggie, "and it's an awful melancholy thing to think that this is my last day here. But it's been a beauty of a week, I'm no end grateful to you for bringing me."

Reggie had the caressing moods of a very young thing. As he spoke he left his seat and established himself on the ground leaning back against his brother's knees and anchoring himself with a hand passed round his leg.

"I should have had to stew in Sidney Street for my week of holiday," he went on, "if it hadn't been for you. It was ripping of you to let me come."

"It's I who score," said Charles. "You've earned your keep all right. I should have had to hire a model otherwise, or have done without one."

"Oh, well, then, we both score."

Reggie threw away the end of his cigarette and abstracted Charles' case from his pocket.

"I must go up to town this afternoon," he said, "for Thistleton's Gallery opens again to-morrow morning. And there I shall sit, all July, at the receipt of custom and sell catalogues and make the turn-stile click and acknowledge receipts ... oh, a dog's life. Jove, what a lot of money some of those fellows have! There was an American who came in last week and went around the gallery with a great fat white man called Craddock who often comes and shows people round. I rather think he is Thistleton, and owns the place. I say, Charles——"

Reggie broke off suddenly.

"Why, I believe it was he who was in the punt last night," he said, "and was standing on the lawn with that girl you sang at——"

"Didn't notice him particularly," said Charles.

"No, you were noticing somebody else particularly. But I feel sure it was he. As I say, he was taking an American round last week, who bought a couple of little Dutch pictures. He stopped at my desk on the way out and borrowed my pen and wrote a cheque for £5000 right straight off, without coughing. I remember he said he was going to post-date it. But he didn't tip me."

"I don't quite know what this is all about," remarked Charles.

"Nor do I. I hoped it was just agreeable conversation. Don't you find it so? But I bet you what you like that the fat white man in the punt was Craddock."

Reggie lay further back against his brother's legs.

"I see a great tragedy ahead," he said, "with inquests and executions. Craddock is about to marry the girl of the punt, and Charles will cut his throat, and——"

"Whose throat?" asked Charles.

"His own or Craddock's; perhaps Craddock's first and his own afterwards. Then there will be a sensational trial, and I can't bother to make up any more. Are you going to paint all the morning, Charles?"

"No, none of it. It's enough for to-day to have finished you. I shall stop down here a day or two more and do another sketch after you have gone. I'm at your disposal this morning."

"Then let us do nothing for a long time, and then bathe for a long time, and then do both all over again. Lord, I wish I was an artist like you, instead of a doorkeeper, to stop about all day in

delicious places, and do exactly what you like best in the world, which is to paint."

"It would make it completer if anybody wanted best in the world to buy what I had painted," remarked Charles.

"But you sold two water colours the other day for three pounds each," remarked the consolatory Reggie. "That's as much as I earn in a month."

"It might happen oftener," said Charles. "By the way, I heard from Mother last night."

"A nice woman," said Reggie.

"Quite. She sent me another sovereign in case funds had run low. When you get back you will find she has been living on tea and toast because she didn't feel hungry."

Reggie gave a huge sigh.

"I wish a man might marry his mother," he observed. "I should certainly marry her and we would ask you and the punt-girl to stay with us."

"Very kind," said Charles.

These two young men who were enjoying so open-aired a week of June by the Thames-side were the only children of the widow whom they kindly agreed to regard as a "nice woman." They had been brought up in easy and well-to-do circumstances, and educated at public schools, until the suicide of their father a little more than a year ago had disclosed a state of affairs that was as appalling as it was totally unexpected. He was a jobber on the stock-exchange and partner in a firm of high repute, but he had been privately indulging in a course of the wildest gambling, and he could not face the exposure which he knew could no longer be avoided. The sale of the pleasant country home at Walton Heath, and the disposal of all that could be converted into cash had been barely sufficient to make an honourable settlement of his unimagined debts. Neither his wife nor either of the boys had ever dreamed of the possibility of such a situation: never had it appeared that he had had the slightest anxiety with regard to money. His self-control had been perfect until, as with the breaking of some dam, it had given way altogether in ruin and destruction. Till that very moment he had been the gayest and youngest of that eager little family party, all of whom brought an extraordinary lightness and zest to the conduct of their unclouded lives. Charles had already left school for a three years when the stroke fell, and was studying in a famous *atelier* in Paris, while Reggie, still at Marlborough, was devoting as much time as he could reasonably be expected to spare from athletic exercises to the acquiring of foreign tongues with a view to the diplomatic service. They had both been instantly sent for by their mother, who met his death with a fortitude that never wavered. It was not long that they had to wait for the explanation of the utterly unlooked-for catastrophe, for a very short examination of his private papers showed the extent of his defaulting and the imminence of the crash. Willingly, had it been possible, would she have kept from her sons the knowledge that he had killed himself, bearing alone the unshared secret, but an explanation of accident was impossible. Equally impossible was it to conceal the miserable cause of it.

It was on the evening of Charles' return from Paris, as they sat in the still house that till to-day had always rung with jollity, while heathery sweetness and the resinous odour of pines came in at the open windows, that she told them everything, quite shortly, and when that was done and they were still half stunned with the sudden horror that had blackened life, she rallied her own courage by awakening theirs.

"You know it all, my darlings," she said, "and now whenever you think of it, and for a long time it will always be in your thoughts, you must think of it all as some dreadful mistake that dear Dad made, something he never meant at all. He got his troubles muddled up in his head till he didn't know what he was doing. He felt he couldn't bear it, just as sometimes he used to call out when we were playing some silly game like Animal Grab 'I can't bear it: I can't bear it.' Oh, Charles, my darling, don't cry so awfully. We've got to go straight ahead again, with all our courage undismayed, and show that we can face anything that God chooses to send us."

She waited a little, comforting now one and now the other.

"It was all a mistake," she went on, "and we must never allow ourselves to think that it was the dear Dad we knew who did it. He wasn't himself: trouble had made him forget himself and all of us just for a moment. We will think about that moment as little as we can, and then only as a mistake, but we will think constantly and lovingly of the dear Dad we have known all these years, who was so loving and tender to all three of us, and whom we knew as so gay and light-hearted. We will have him constantly in our thoughts like that, this and all the loving-kindness of the years in which we laughed and loved together. And if we can't help, as we shan't be able to do, thinking with a sort of wondering despair of that blunder, that mistake, we must remember that, somehow or other, though we can't explain how, it is and was even then in the hands of God."

It had been no vague piety or bloodless resignation that had inspired her then, nor in the year that followed, and it had required a very full measure of the essential spirit of youth, which never sits down with folded hands, but despises resignation as it despises any other sort of inaction, to bring them all to the point where they stood to-day. Whether the boys helped their mother most, or she them, is one of those problems of psychological proportions into which it is unnecessary to enquire, since each had been throughout the year, essential to the others. For if there had been

no jolly boys coming home at evening to Mrs. Lathom in their lodgings in the meagre gentility of Sidney Street, she could no more have got through her industrious day with hope never quenched in her heart than could they if there had been no mother waiting to welcome them. She without waiting a day after they moved to London invested a few pounds of their exiguous capital in buying a typewriting machine, and before long, by dint of unremitting work was earning a wage sufficient, with Reggie's office salary, to keep the three of them in independence and adequate comfort, as well as to pay for a slip of a dilapidated studio in a neighbouring street, where Charles toiled with all the fire of his young heart and swiftly-growing skill of hand at his interrupted studies.

It was for him, of all the three, that life was most difficult since he was an expense only to the others and it required all the young man's courage to persevere in work which at present brought in almost nothing. But his mother's courage reinforced his: while it was possible for him to continue working, it would be a cowardly surrender to give up tending the ripening fruit of his years in Paris, and let the tree wither, and turn his brushes, so to speak, into pens, and his palette into an office stool. Besides, he had within him, lying secret and shy but vitally alive, the unalterable conviction of the true artist that his work was ordained to be art, and that where his heart was there would sufficient treasure be found also. But it was hard for him, even with the endorsing sincerity of his mother's encouragement, to continue being the drone of the hive so far as actual earning was concerned, and it had demanded the utmost he had of faith in himself and love for his art to continue working with that ecstasy of toil that art demands at all that which his education needed, and not to grudge days and weeks spent in work as profitless from the earning point of view as he believed it to be profitable in his own artistic equipment. Drawing had always been his weak point, and hour after interminable hour from casts or from the skeleton, properties saved from the lavish Paris days, he would patiently copy the framework of bones and patiently clothe them in their appropriate muscles and sinews. As must always happen, long weeks of work went by without progress as noticed by himself, until once and once again he found himself standing on firm ground instead of floundering through bogs and quick-sands which endlessly engulfed his charcoal and his hours, and knew that certain haltings and uncertainties of line troubled him no longer. But he made no pause for self-congratulation but continued with that mingling of fire and unremitting patience which is characteristic of the true and inspired learner. Colour and the whole complex conception of values, which go to make up the single picture, instead of a collection, however well rendered, of different objects was naturally his: he had by instinct that embracing vision that takes in the subject as a whole.

The heat of the morning disposed to quiescence, and the two boys with the spice of meadow-sweet and loosestrife round them, and the coolness of the running water, drowsily booming, to temper the growing swelter of the day, talked lazily and desultorily, concerned with these things, for a long time after breakfast was over. But they were vividly concerned with them no more: to each the opening pageant of life was more engrossing than the tragedy of the past, being young they looked forward, where the middle-aged would have dwelt with the present, and the old have mumbled and starved with the past. But to them it was but dawn, and the promise of day was the insistent thing, and there was no temptation to dwell in ruins, and conjure back the night. But before long the itch for activity, in spite of their resolve of a lazy morning, possessed each, and Reggie fervidly washed up the used crockery of breakfast, while Charles went up the few yards of path that lay between the tent and the side of the weir, to behold again the picture he had left standing on its easel. In his heart he knew it was finished, but in the eagerness of his youth he almost looked forward to some further brushful of inspiration. He would not touch what he knew was good: he hoped only to find something that could be touched with advantage.

He turned a sharp corner, where willows screened the weir; his picture was planted within a dozen yards of him. But between him and his picture was planted a big white-faced man who was regarding it so intently that he did not hear the swish of the parted willows. It was not till Charles was at his elbow that Craddock turned and saw him.

And he put into his manner the deference which he reserved for duchesses and talent.

"I have come to your private view," he said, "without being asked, and it was very impertinent of me. But really this is my second visit. I had my first private view yesterday, when I looked at your picture from a punt in which I happened to be. I had just a couple of glimpses at your work before this. You have been very fortunate in your inspiration since then. The Muse paid you a good visit this morning."

Charles said nothing, but his eyes questioned this intruder, giving him a tentative welcome. But before the pause was at all prolonged the tentative welcome had been changed into a wondering and tremulous expectancy. Were there fairies still by the Thames-side? Was this fat white man to prove a fairy?

"You have painted an admirable picture," continued the possible fairy, "and the handling of the most difficult part of all—of course you know I mean the lights and shadows on that delightful figure—is masterly. Of course there are faults, plenty of them, but you can see, and you can draw, and you can paint."

Craddock saw Charles' lip quiver, and heard that it cost him an effort to command his voice.

"Not really?" he stammered.

"Unless I am much mistaken, and it has been the business of my life to seek out those who can see and draw and paint. Now I don't know your name, and assuredly I have never seen your work before, and since it is my business also to know the names and the works of all young men who

can paint, I imagine that you have your artistic *début*, so to speak, still in front of you. But I shall be exceedingly grateful to you if you will sell me your picture, straight away, here and now. And if you won't let me have it for fifty pounds, I shall have to offer you sixty."

Charles looked vaguely round, first at Craddock then at his picture, then at the spouting weir, almost expecting to see them melt, as is the manner of dreams, into some other farrago as fantastical as this, or dissolve altogether into a waking reality.

"Do you really mean you will give me fifty pounds for it," he asked.

"No: I will give you sixty. But don't touch it again. Take my word for it that it is finished. Or did you know that already?"

"Oh, yes," said the boy. "I finished it an hour ago. But I came back to make sure."

"Well, then, when you leave your encampment here, will you please send it to me at this address? That is to say, if I am to have the privilege of purchasing it."

This repetition gave reality to the interview: people in dreams were not so persistent, and Charles gave a little joyous laugh, as Craddock took a card out of his pocket and gave it to him.

"Or were you thinking of exhibiting it?" he asked.

"I was meaning to have a try with it at the autumn Exhibition of the 'Artists and Etchers,'" said Charles.

"I have no objection to that, provided you will let me have a little talk with you first, and put certain proposals before you."

He looked at the picture again, and saw more surely than ever its admirable quality. It had unity: it was a picture of a boy just about to plunge into a sunlit pool, not a boy, and a pool, and some sunlight, a mere pictorial map, or painted enumeration of objects. It was all tingling with freshness and vitality and the rapture of early achievement: no artist, however skilled, if he had outgrown his youthful enthusiasm could have done it like that, though he would easily have produced a work more technically faultless. Eagerness, though wonderfully controlled, burned in it; the joy of life shouted from it. And when he looked from it to the tall shy boy whose grey eyes had seen that, whose long fingers had handled the brushes that recorded it, he felt sure he would not go far wrong in his own interests in making a proposal to him that would seem to him fantastical in its encouraging generosity. Indeed he felt that there was no element of chance in the matter, for there could be no doubt about this young man's temperament, which lies at the bottom of all artistic achievement, and in this case was so clearly to be read in those eager eyes and sensitive mouth. Naturally he had a tremendous lot to learn, but a temperament so full of ardent life and romantic perception as that which had inspired this idyll of youth and sunshine and outpouring waters would never rest from the realization of its dreams and visions.

He looked at his watch and found he had still half an hour before he need to go to the station.

"Can you give me a few minutes of your time now?" he said.

"Of course. I will just tell my brother that I can't come with him at once. We were going on the river."

"Do. Tell him to come back for you in half-an-hour. That is he, I suppose, on the header-board."

Charles went quickly down the little path to the tent.

"O, Reggie," he said. "The fat white man has come and bought my picture. Absolutely bought it. It's real: I'm just beginning to believe it."

Reggie stared for a moment. Then, for he had a poor opinion of his brother's business capacities, "How much?" he demanded.

"Sixty pounds. Not shillings, pounds. And he wants to talk to me now, so come back for me in half-an-hour. He says I can paint, and somehow I think he knows."

"Bless his fat face," said Reggie. "We'll let him have it at his own price. Anything for the model? I think the model deserves something."

"He shall get it," said Charles.

Reggie caught hold of his brother by the shoulders, and danced him round in three wild capering circles.

Arthur Craddock had sat himself down on the steps that led to the header-board waiting for Charles' return. He had turned the picture round, so that he saw it in a less perplexing light, and found that he had no need to reconsider his previous conclusions about it. It was brimful of lusty talent, and there seemed to him to be a hint of something more transcendent than talent. There was a really original note in it: it had a style of its own, not a style of others, and though he felt sure that the artist must have studied at *Bonnart's* in Paris, there was something about the drawing of it which had never been taught in that admirable atelier. And the artist was so young: there was no telling at what he might not arrive. Craddock had a true reverence for genius, and he suspected genius here. He also had a very keen appreciation of advantageous financial transactions, which he expected might be gratified before long. For both these reasons he awaited Charles' return with impatience. He was prepared to make his proposal to him at once, if

necessary, but he felt he would prefer to see more of his work first.

Charles did not tax his patience long: he came running back.

"Let us begin at the beginning, like the catechism," said Craddock. "What is your name?"

"Charles Lathom."

"And mine is Arthur Craddock. So here we are."

Craddock was capable of considerable charm of manner and a disarming frankness, and already Charles felt disposed both to like and trust him.

"Your work, such as I have seen of it," Craddock went on, "interests me immensely. Also it makes me feel a hundred years old, which is not in itself pleasant, but I bear no grudge, for the means"—and he pointed at the picture, "excuse the effect. Now, my dear Lathom, be kind and answer me a few questions. You studied with Bonnart, did you not?"

"Yes, for two years."

"Only that? You used your time well. But who taught you drawing?"

Charles looked at him with a charmingly youthful modesty and candour.

"Nobody," he said. "I couldn't draw at all when I left Bonnart's. Of course I don't mean that I can draw now. But I worked very hard by myself for the last year. I felt I had to learn drawing for myself: at least Bonnart couldn't teach me."

"And have you copied much?"

"I copy in the National Gallery. I try to copy the English masters."

"There is no better practice, and you will do well to keep it up, provided you do plenty of original work too. But of course you can't help doing that. I should like to see some of your copies, unless you have sold them."

Charles laughed.

"Not I, worse luck," he said. "Indeed, I have only done bits of pictures. You see——"

He was warming to his confession: the artist within him bubbled irrepressibly in the presence of this man who seemed to understand him so well, and to invite his confidence.

"You see, I didn't care so much about copying entire pictures," he said. "It wasn't Reynolds' grouping—is that fearfully conceited?—that I wanted to learn and to understand, but his drawing, ears, noses, hands—I find I can manage the composition of my picture in a way that seems to me more or less right, and can see the values, but the drawing: that was what I wanted to get. And it has improved. It was perfectly rotten a year ago."

A further idea lit its lamp in Craddock's quick brain.

"You shall show me some of your studies," he said. "And should you care to copy a Reynolds, I feel sure I can get you a good commission, if your copies are anything like as good as your original work. Do tell me anything more about yourself, that you feel disposed to."

Charles brushed his hair back off his forehead. Craddock's manner was so supremely successful with him that he did not know that it was manner at all. He felt he could tell him anything: he trusted him completely.

"I studied with Bonnart for two years," he said, "and then there came a crash. My father died, and we were left extremely poor; in fact, we were left penniless. Perhaps you remember. My mother earns money, so does Reggie, my brother. But for this last year, you see, it is I whom they have been supporting. They wanted me to go on working, and not mind about that. So I worked on: I have been very industrious I think, but till now, till this minute, I haven't earned more than a pound or two. That's why——"

Charles had to pause a moment. The reality and significance of what was happening almost overwhelmed him. Sixty pounds meant a tremendous lot to him, but the meaning of it, that of which it was the symbol meant so infinitely more.

"That's why I could hardly believe at first that you wanted to buy my picture," he said. "It seemed too big a thing to happen. It's not only the fact of sixty pounds, it's your belief that my picture is worth it, that I can paint. But if nobody ever wanted to buy or saw any merit in what I did, I don't believe I could help going on working."

He was sitting on the ground just below the steps which Craddock occupied, and he felt a kind hand on his shoulder, as if to calm and fortify his voice which he knew was rather unsteady.

"So I guessed," said Craddock, "but it is just as pleasant to find that somebody does believe in you, and I assure you that I am only the first of many who will. Now about our arrangements—I will give you ten pounds at once to show you I am in earnest about buying your picture——"

"O, good Lord, no," interrupted Charles.

"I should prefer it, and I will send you the balance from town. Now will you come up there to-morrow and show me what you call your bits of things? Show me them the day after to-morrow, and shall we say ten in the morning? You must give me the address of your studio and I will come there. Bring up your picture with you, but get some boy from the village to look after your tent and belongings for a night or two, if you prefer this to rooms. Very likely you will want to occupy it again. The Reynolds of which I spoke is in a house near."

Craddock got up and pulled out a Russia-leather pocketbook.

"Here is my earnest money," he said. "Your studio address? Thanks."

Charles' heart was so full that it seemed to choke his brain and his power of utterance. The first ineffable moment of recognition, dear even to the most self-reliant of artists, had come to him, and until then he had not known how nearly he had despaired of its advent. He held out his hand, and smiled and shook his head.

"It's no use my trying to thank you," he said, "for there are no words that are any use. But I expect you know."

As has been said, Arthur Craddock had a profound reverence for talent quite apart from his keen pleasure in advantageous bargains, and his answer, dictated by that was quite sincere.

"The thanks must pass from me to you," he said. "People like myself who are unable to create, find their rewards in being able to appreciate the work of those like yourself. Pray do not think of me as a patron: I am a customer, but I hope I may prove to you that I am a good one. Ten o'clock, then, the day after to-morrow."

Craddock had the invaluable mental gift of attending with a thoroughness hermetically sealed from all other distractions to the business on hand. Nor did he let his mind dribble its force into other channels, when he wanted the whole of it to gush from one nozzle, and in this interview with Charles Lathom he had summoned his whole energy, though the expression of it was very quiet, to winning the boy's confidence, and making himself appear as a discerning and generous appreciator. It would have seemed to him a very poor policy to obtain this picture, as he could no doubt have done, for a quarter of the price he had offered for it, while on the other hand, it was unnecessary to offer twice that price (which he would willingly have done) since he could make the impression that was needful for his future scheme, at the lower figure. Economy was an excellent thing, but there was no mistake more gross than to economize at the wrong time. He was satisfied as to this, and now he dismissed the subject of Charles and his picture quite completely, and turned his whole thoughts elsewhere.

There were several directions in which it might profitably have turned; he turned it to one in which any possible profit was remote. That morning, before he made this visit to Charles, Craddock had proposed to Joyce, who had refused him. He had not taken, and did not now take her refusal as final, and told her so, but it had considerably surprised him. He knew well how restricted a life she led at home, how subjected she was to her father's peevish caprices and complaints, how cut off she was from the general diversions of life, and this, added to her father's assurance that he "pleased her" was sufficient to make him frankly astonished at her rejection of him, and her refusal to walk through the door which he held open for her, and which provided so easy an escape from all these disabilities. He had put before her, though not pompously, these advantages, he had mentioned that her father endorsed his application, he had not omitted to lay stress on his devotion to her, and had ascertained that there was no rival in the field of her maidenly preference. It is true that he was not in love with her, but, acute man though he was in all that concerned the head, it never entered into his mind, even now, as he drove to the station, and thought intently about the subject, that this omission could have had anything to do with his ill-success. It is quite doubtful whether, even if he had been desperately in love with her, Joyce would conceivably have given any different answer, but, as it was, the omission was so fatal to her instinct, that there could not be a moment's struggle or debate for her. She was not even sorry for him, for clearly there was nothing real to be sorry for. Otherwise, she would have sincerely regretted her inability to accept him, for, in spite of a certain physical distaste which she felt for him, she liked him, and admired his quickness and cleverness. Had her father told her that Craddock was going to live with him, she would have hailed him with a genuine welcome. But quite apart from her feeling towards him, there was the insuperable barrier of his want of feeling towards her. Of that barrier, of the possibility of her knowing it, he, with all his cleverness, had no idea. But to Joyce the whole matter was abundantly evident; she knew he did not even love her, and his love for her was the only thing that could have made her acceptance of him ever so faintly possible. Without that all other reasons for marrying him were fly-blown; no debate, no balancings were conceivable. The scale dented the beam with its unchecked kick.

He thought over this ill-success, guessed without getting within miles of the truth at the primary reason for it, as he drove through the white sunshine from his interview with the astounded and grateful Charles, and almost immediately became aware that in the last hour, his feelings for Joyce had undergone a curious intensification. Inspired, as he had been all his life by desires that were entirely material, he had been used, by the aid of his clever brain, to compass and possess them. Often, of course, he had not been able for the mere wanting, to obtain the coveted object, and hitherto, it had almost invariably happened that this temporary check stirred him up to such further efforts as were necessary. A wish denied him hitherto, had connoted a wish intensified, and since there is a great deal of truth latent in the commonplace that to want a thing enough always earns the appropriate reward of desire, he had not often fainted or failed before reaching his goal. Even now, though up till now his desire for Joyce had been scarcely more than a wish, it seemed to him different from all other wishes; it was becoming a desire as simple and primal as hunger for food or sleep.... Some internal need dictated it. This was disturbing, and since he had other immediate work on hand, he turned his attention to a typewritten manuscript, of which he had read part, last night; he proposed to finish it in the train.

Craddock, as has been said, had a mind profoundly critical and appreciative: he had also quite distinct and segregate, an astonishing *flair* for perceiving what the public would appreciate. Often he bought pictures which from an artistic point of view he thought frankly contemptible

because he saw signs so subtle that they were instinctively perceived rather than reasoned—that the public was going to see something in either an old outworn mode, or in some new and abominable trickery. He then transferred his purchases to Thistleton's Gallery, and gladly parted with them on advantageous terms. But this *flair* of his was by no means confined to mere pictorial representations, and he was always glad to read a novel or a play in manuscript, with a view to purchasing it himself, and disposing of his acquired rights to publisher or playwright. Living as he publicly did in the centre of things, an assiduous diner out and frequenter of fashionable staircases, he yet had a quiet and secret life of his own as distinct from the other as are the lives of inhabitants in adjoining houses, whose circle of friends are as diverse as bishops from ballet-dancers. He preferred to deal in the work of men who were young or unknown, and at present had not been able to get producers for their possible masterpieces. He was thus often able by liberal offers to secure an option of purchase (at a specified figure) over the output of their next few years. Often to the sick-heartedness of their deferred hopes, such prospects seemed dictated by a princely liberality, and they were gladly accepted. Scores of such plays he read and found wanting, but every now and then he came across something which with judicious handling and backed by the undoubted influence he had with the public through the press, he felt sure he could waft into desirable havens. Only this morning by the weir-side he had found a gem of very pure ray, which he believed to be easily obtainable, and now as he read this manuscript in the train, he fancied that his jewel-box need not be locked up again yet. The public he thought to be tired of problem-dramas: they liked their thinking to be peptonized for them, and presented in a soft digestible form. Just at present, too, they had no use for high romance on the one hand, or, on the other, subtle situations and delicate unravellings. They wanted to be shown the sort of thing, that, with a little laughter and no tears, might suitably happen to perfectly commonplace, undistinguished (though not indistinguishable) persons, and in this comedy of suburban villadom, with curates and stockbrokers and churchwardens behaving naturally and about as humorously as they might be expected to behave without straining themselves, he felt sure that he held in his hand a potential success on a large scale.

The author was young and desperately poor: he had already had a play on the boards at the first night of which Arthur Craddock had been present, which had scored as complete a failure as could possibly have been desired to produce suitable humility in a young man. But Craddock, who always thought for himself instead of accepting the opinions of others, had seen what good writing there was in it, how curiously deft was the handling of the material, and knew that the failure was largely due to the choice of subject, though ten years ago it would probably have been welcomed as vigorously as it was now condemned. It was an excellent play of ten years ago, or perhaps ten years to come, with its lurid story too difficult for the indolent theatre-goer of this particular year to grasp, and its climax of inextricable misery. He had therefore immediately written to Frank Armstrong, the author, and at an ensuing interview told him what, in his opinion, were the lines on which to build a popular success. Then, guessing, or, rather knowing, that Armstrong must have attempted drama many times before he had produced so mature a piece of work as the unfortunate "Lane Without a Turning," he said:

"I daresay you have something in your desk at home, rather like what I have been sketching to you, which you have very likely failed to get produced before now. Send it to me, and let me read it."

It was this play "Easter-Eggs" which Craddock finished as the train slowed down into Paddington Station. It could not be described as so fine a play as that which had achieved so complete a failure, but it had all that the other lacked in popular and effective sentiment. Even to a man of Craddock's experience in the want of discernment in theatrical managers, it was quite astounding that it had ever been refused, but he could guess why this had been its fate. For there was no "star-part" in it; there was no character, overwhelmingly conspicuous, who could dominate the whole play and turn it into a "one-man" show. The success of it must depend on level competent acting, without limelight and slow music. It was a domestic drama without villain or hero or dominating personality, and when he again read over the list of acting managers to whom Frank Armstrong had submitted it, he saw how absurd it was to suppose that Tranby or Akroyd or Miss Loughton could ever have considered its production. But he saw also how a company of perfectly-unknown artists could admirably present it, with a great saving of salaries. It needed moderate talent evenly distributed, and one part mishandled would wreck it as surely as would some ranting actor-manager who tried to force a dominant personality into the play, and only succeeded in upsetting the whole careful balance of it. Even as Craddock drove back to his sumptuous and airless flat in Berkeley Square he jotted down a half-dozen names of those who filled minor parts in star-plays quite excellently. He wanted them without the stars.

And then quite suddenly, his mind, usually so obedient, bolted, and proceeded at top-speed in quite another direction. Without intention, he found himself wondering what Joyce was doing, whether she would have told her father about his proposal, or confided in that astutest of grandmothers, whether she was in the punt with panting dogs, or still troubled with the undoubted indisposition of Buz, who had not been at all well, so she had told him, this last day or two. Her life seemed to him a deplorable waste of heavenly maidenhood, partly owing to a selfish father, partly, now at least, because she had not consented to waste it no longer. Youth lasted so short a time and its possessors so often squandered it on things that profited not, ailing dogs, for instance, and swans' nests among the reeds.

Then he caught sight of his own large face in the mirror of his motor, and felt terribly old. He, too, had squandered his youth in the amassing of knowledge, in all that could have been acquired when the leap of the blood thrilled less imperatively, in the passion devoted to passionless things,

in the mere acquisition of wealth, in the formation of his unerring taste and acumen. But he knew that his blood had tuned itself to a brisker and more virile pulse, since Joyce had shaken her head and smiled, and been a little troubled. Or was it over the indisposition of Buz that she was troubled?

Then, arriving at his flat, he became his own man again, and cordially telephoned to Frank Armstrong to have lunch with him.

CHAPTER III.

An hour later Frank Armstrong was sitting opposite Craddock eating lunch with the steadfast and business-like air of a man who was not only hungry now, but knew from long experience that it was prudent to eat whenever edibles could be had for nothing. Some minutes before Craddock had suggested a slice of cold meat to give solidity to the very light repast that was so suitable to the heat of the day, and since then Armstrong had been consuming ham and firm pieces of bread without pause or speech. But nobody was less greedy than he; only, for years of his life he had been among the habitually hungry. In appearance he was rugged and potentially fierce: a great shock of black hair crowned a forehead that projected like a pent-house over deep-set angry eyes, and it might be guessed that he was a person both easy and awkward to quarrel with, for his expression was suspicious and resentful, as of some wild beast, accustomed to ill-usage, but whom ill-usage had altogether failed in taming. But though this ugliness of expression was certainly the predominant characteristic of that strong distrustful face, a less casual observer might easily form the conclusion that there were better things below, a certain eagerness, a certain patience, a certain sensibility.

He looked up at Craddock after a while, with a queer crooked smile on his large mouth, not without charm.

"I will now cease being a pig," he said. "But when one is really hungry one can't think about anything else. It is no more hoggish, really, than the longing for sleep if you haven't slept for nights, or for water when one is thirsty. I had no breakfast this morning. Now what have you got to talk to me about?"

Craddock was a strong believer in the emollient effects of food, and had determined to talk no business till his client was at ease in a chair with tobacco and quiescent influences.

"Ah, no breakfast!" he said. "I myself find that I work best before I eat."

Frank Armstrong laughed.

"I don't," he said. "I work best after a large meal. No: I did not have breakfast, because it would have been highly inconvenient to pay for it. There are such people, you know. I have often been one of them."

Arthur Craddock found this peremptory young savage slightly alarming. For himself he demanded that social intercourse should be conducted in a sort of atmosphere of politeness, of manners. Just as in landscape-painting you had to have atmosphere, else the effect was of cast-iron, so in dealings with your fellow-men. There should be no such things as edges, particularly raw ones. He thought he had seldom seen anybody so unatmospheric.

"My dear fellow," he said. "Do you mean that you have been actually in want of money to pay for food? Why did you not tell me? You knew what an interest I took in you and your work."

Frank looked at him quite unatmospherically.

"But why should my having breakfast matter to you?" he said. "You wanted my work, if you thought it good: if not, I was no more to you than all the rest of the brutes who go without breakfast. Now about the play. At least, I don't suppose you asked me to lunch in order to talk about breakfast. I quite expect you to tell me it's twaddle, indeed, I know it is. But does it by any chance seem to you remunerative twaddle?"

Craddock really suffered in this want of atmosphere. He gasped, mentally speaking, like an unaccustomed aeronaut in rarefied air.

"Ah, I can't agree with you that it is twaddle," he said. "The plot no doubt is slender, but the dialogue is excellent, and you show considerable precision and fineness of line in the character-drawing."

"But what characters?" said the candid author. "The curate, the housemaid, the churchwarden. Lord, what people, without a shred of life or force in them. But it answered your description of what theatre-goers liked. I wrote it last year, in a reaction after the 'Lane without a Turning.'"

"Ah, was that it?" said Craddock. "It puzzled me to know how a boy like you—you are a boy, my dear fellow—could possibly write anything so bitter and hopeless as that, and something so quietly genial as 'Easter Eggs.'"

"Easily enough. I myself wrote the one: it was me, and as I found out, nobody liked it. 'Easter Eggs' is merely my observation of a quantity of blameless chattering people. I lived in Surbiton when I was quite a boy. They were rather like that: there were teaparties and sewing-societies to relieve distress among the poor. Packets of cross-overs used to be sent to Cancer Hospitals. Let's get back to the subject. Remunerative or not?"

"Without doubt remunerative," agreed Craddock again gasping.

"But I have given three of our leading actors the opportunity of remunerating themselves and me, and they won't touch it. Are their souls above remuneration, and do they only want topping high art?"

Arthur Craddock did not see his way to telling Armstrong that he had sent his play to exactly those managers who would be quite certain to refuse it, because that was information which he had excellent reason, if he was to conclude an advantageous bargain, for keeping to himself.

"Nevertheless, I am right about your play," he said, "and Tranby and Akroyd are wrong."

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"So you tell me," he observed.

"Yes, and I am willing to back my opinion. I will here and now buy this play from you and pay for it at a figure which you will not consider ungenerous, considering it is a pure speculation on my part. But there are certain conditions."

Frank Armstrong pulled his chair up closer to the table, and put his elbows on it. Craddock could see that his fingers were trembling.

"Name your conditions, if you will be so good," he said. "Perhaps you would also tell me more about the not ungenerous figure."

Craddock held up a white plump hand of deprecation. He positively could not get on without manners and life's little insincerities. As this young man seemed to have none of them, he had to supply sufficient for two. He was glad to observe that signal of nervousness on Armstrong's part: it argued well for the acceptance of his bargain.

"You are so direct, my dear fellow," he said. "You demand a 'yes' or a 'no' like a cross-examining counsel. You must permit me to explain the situation. I take a great interest in your work and in you, and I am willing to run a considerable risk in order to give your work a chance of being fairly judged and appreciated. Now there is nothing more difficult to gauge than the likings of the public, and while I tell you that your play will be without doubt remunerative, I may be hopelessly in error. But I see in it certain qualities which I think will attract, though in your previous play, which, frankly, I think a finer piece of work than this, the public was merely repelled. But here ___"

Armstrong's elbow gave a jerk that was quite involuntary.

"Shall we come to the point?" he said. "Of course this is all very gratifying, but we can talk about the play's merits afterwards. How much do you offer me for 'Easter Eggs' and on what conditions?"

Craddock drummed with his plump fingers on the table. Looking across at the strong rough face opposite him he could see suspense and anxiety very clearly written there. He felt a rather nasty pleasure in that: it was like poking up some fierce animal with a stick, where there are bars between which prevent its retaliating violence. But perhaps it would be kinder to put it out of its suspense, for Armstrong wanted to know this more than he had wanted lunch even.

"I offer you £500 down for all rights of your play," he said, "on conditions that you let me have three more of your plays within the next three years at the same price, should I choose to buy them."

Armstrong did not take his eyes off him, nor did the stringency of their gaze relax.

"Did you say £500?" he asked in an odd squeaky little voice.

"I did."

Then the tension relaxed. The young man got up and rubbed the backs of his hands across his eyes.

"If I'm asleep," he said, "I hope I shan't wake for a long time. It's deuced pleasant. I don't quite know what five hundred pounds mean—I can't see to the end of them. I thought perhaps you were going to offer me £50. I should certainly have accepted it. Why didn't you?"

This was a good opportunity for Craddock.

"Because I do not happen to be a sweater," he said, "and because like an honest man I prefer paying a fair price for good work."

Armstrong gave a great shout of laughter.

"And because there isn't much difference to you between fifty pounds and five hundred," he said.

He paused.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I had no business to say that. But I don't understand your offer. By the way, of course I accept it."

Craddock had tried to look hurt when this rather ruthless suggestion as to the reason for his generosity was made, but he did not feel within himself that his attempt was very successful, and was glad to look benign again when Frank Armstrong apologised.

The tremulousness of his hands had ceased, and he looked straight at his benefactor with his distrustful gaze. Then once more the crooked rather charming smile came on his mouth.

"Personally, I am sure you rather detest me," he said, "so I suppose it seems to you worth while

financially to run this risk with your money. So, though I'm bewildered, I tell you frankly, with the prospect of five hundred pounds, I'm not grateful to you. I wish I was. Of course, if 'Easter Eggs' makes anything of a hit, you will do pretty well, and I shall be a popular playwright——"

He broke off a moment, and pushed back his hair.

"Ah, I see: that's where you come in," he said. "You have an option to buy three more plays by a popular playwright at the same price. Again if any of the three new ones makes a success, you won't do very badly."

Craddock went on the whisker-hunt for a moment.

"And if 'Easter Eggs' is put on, and fails, as your other play did," he observed, "shall I not be considerably out of pocket? And another failure would not encourage me to exercise my option over any future work of yours. However, let it be me this time who asks you to come to the point. Do you accept my offer or not? I may mention that I shall not renew it. I cannot waste my time over arrangements that come to nothing."

Armstrong nodded at him with comparative friendliness.

"Good Lord, yes. I accept it," he said. "I told you I should have accepted £50."

Craddock got up.

"Then if you have finished your lunch, we might draw up an agreement over our cigarettes."

"Certainly. I daresay you will let me have a cigar, too. And when I've signed, or whatever I have to do, will you give me a cheque straight off? I shall have a banking account, I suppose, and I shan't be hungry again for ever, as far as I can see. By George, I ought to be grateful to you. But I think the sort of experience I've been through don't give a fellow much practice in gratitude. Gratitude is an acquired virtue. It is the prosperous who mainly acquire it."

Craddock patted him on the shoulder.

"My dear fellow, you may leave the cynicism of the Lane that had no Turning behind you," he said.

Armstrong suddenly drew up his shirt-cuff and showed a long scar healed years ago which ran nearly up to his elbow.

"That's where my father threw a knife at me once," he said. "It was a bad shot, for he threw it at my head. It's healed, you might think: it looks healed. It bleeds inside, though."

This was a savage young beast, it seemed, that Craddock had got hold of, one who had been set in slippery places, that sloped hell-wards. Craddock had known some who had learned patience from their sojournings in such resorts, he had known others who had simply been broken by it, others again, and of those possibly the joyful and attractive Charles Lathom was one, who seemed to have taken no colour from their surroundings, but emerged with their serenity and sweetness undisturbed. But never yet had he seen anyone who came out of dark places with mere anger and resentment against his sufferings, and yet with strength quite unimpaired. Armstrong seemed to him like that: the flames apparently had but hardened and annealed him. He had suffered under the lash of circumstance, not stout-heartedly nor with any loss of spirit, and now when for the first time he saw daylight, ahead, he was in no wise grateful for the dispersal of the darkness. He did not hail the sun or melt to the benignancy of its beams: he came out iron, remembering the hunger of the years that had starved his body and his soul, without subduing either, for physically he was hard and muscular, morally he was cynical, expecting from others little except such emotions as he himself shared, the instinct of self-defence, and the stoical bearing of such blows as he could not ward off. He was not in himself kind or unselfish or loving, and up till now he had practically never come across such qualities in others, and there was really no reason why he should believe in their existence. Hitherto, nobody as far as he remembered, had done him a good turn, unless thereby he reaped a personal benefit, and indeed Armstrong saw little reason why anybody should; for the world as he had known it, was not run on lines of altruistic philanthropy. The strong spoiled the weak, and the weak looked for opportunities of preying on the weaker. The rich paid as little as they could for the service of the poor, which was obviously the course that common-sense indicated, while the poor, the workers, combined so far as was possible, to make the rich pay more. There was no reason for either side to act otherwise, and thus he was puzzled to know why Craddock had offered him more than was necessary in order to get this play from him, and the ensuing contract.

As a matter of fact, Craddock had done so for exactly the same reasons as that which prompted him to give Charles Lathom sixty pounds for his sketch: he wanted to earn a sort of blind unreasoning gratitude from his new client, since clients possessed of this convenient spirit were far easier to manage and to deal with. But he had failed, and knew it: this new client, though he looked forward to finding him very remunerative indeed, could not possibly be considered to be blind with gratitude. But after all the main point was that he should sign the contract that embodied Craddock's proposals, which he was perfectly willing to do, and Craddock's butler, coming in with coffee, witnessed the transaction. A leaf from Craddock's cheque-book completed it.

All the appliances of refrigeration, in the way of electric fans and outside blinds, were not more than sufficient to keep Craddock's flat at an agreeable temperature and when, that evening,

about six o'clock Mrs. Lathom put away her typewriter, and the neat piles of manuscript and transcription which had occupied her all day the heat in the little sunbaked sitting room in Sidney Street, which at meal times did duty also as dining-room, was almost overpowering. But she expected the younger of her two handsome boys to arrive from his holiday on the Thames with Charles in time for supper, and tired as she was and worn out with her daily work in this little furnace of a room, her fatigue forgot itself in thought of and preparation for his home-coming.

Reggie had, on a picture postcard that showed Thorley Weir, advertised her of the hour of his train's arrival, and before she need busy herself over the gas-stove that stood in the corner of the passage outside the sitting-room, and had to be fed with pennies to keep its flame burning, she found there was a quarter of an hour left her to rest herself, and if possible to get a few minutes' doze to clear the heat and heaviness from her eyes. This evening in spite of the home-coming of one of her darlings, she was conscious of an unusual despondency, which, quite rightly, she told herself was only physical, and did not touch her spirits or her essential self. But this utter fatigue of body apparently reached down to her mind, and she could not help, since dozing proved an impossible feat, receding backwards into the ashes and desolation of the past. Yet, when she allowed herself to do so something stronger than any sense of desolation met her, love and her womanhood and her motherhood, and the blessing of her boys. And the tired eyes grew brighter again.

Strawberries had been very cheap that morning, and she had bought a basket of them which she had laid out on a newspaper on her bed, each separate, so that they should not bruise each other. She could give Reggie some toasted cheese as well, and tea and bread and butter. It was not such a feast as she had planned for him on the evening of his return, before he went back to his work again at Thistleton's Gallery next morning, but she had sent the boys a sovereign only the day before, in order to let them have a plethora of boat-hire and general jubilation, and until she took the completed copy of the manuscript back to the office next day, there was nothing more in the way of cash that could be expended. Womanlike, with all the direct and tender instincts of womanhood alert, she loved to treat her males to the material comforts of life. Her love had to express itself not only in affection but in the edible transcription of it, and while she would not have denied that Mary had chosen the good part, she had a strong sympathy with Martha, who showed her love in a fashion less purely spiritual perhaps, but none the less authentic. To serve, even if the only monument of service was unbruised strawberries, and the preparation of toasted cheese, cooked over a smelling gas-stove in the heat of this broiling evening, did not seem to her an inferior lot. She knew she had the Mary-love for her boys, but, though she did not reason about the point, nor even was conscious of it, she believed Martha had not chosen a bad part, when she put on her apron, so to speak, and got uncomfortably warm over the kitchen fire.

There were still a few minutes left before she need stir. Reggie's train was just about arriving now, and it would take him a good half-hour to walk home. In twenty minutes she could do her best by his supper, and have the toast and cheese hot and crisp for him, and she had already put the kettle on: tea would be ready simultaneously. She knew the chronology of these simple suppers very well.

She sat in a frayed arm-chair. The room looked west, and at this hour it was not possible to place it entirely out of the sun, and since there was a little wind blowing in she drew up the blind of the window, admitting both. It was her hands and her eyes that were so tired; for a couple of months now it had been something of a strain to read small writing, and to-day even the clear-cut letters of her typewriter were hard to focus. Very probably she was in need of glasses, but an oculist's fee, when expenses so nearly met income, was not a disbursement to be incurred lightly, and certainly her eyesight was not always so bad as it had been to-day. The strain of continual focussing had ruled two vertical lines between her eyebrows, as she had seen when she went to wash her hands after putting away her machine and before cooking Reggie's supper. She had seen them there before, but more faintly. To-day they were deeply carved.

Mrs. Lathom was but a year or two over forty, and she was aware that wrinkles such as these had no right as yet to set up so firm a dwelling-house on her face. But they only troubled her as a sign of eye-strain, a direction-post to the oculist's, and as symbols of approaching age they concerned her not at all, except in so far that approaching age might prove a drag on her energies and her work. Yet it was easy to see that as a girl she must have been beautiful, and women who have been beautiful as girls are not usually so careless over the signs of their lost youth. But the moment's glance sufficient to disentangle from her face the loveliness of its youth, would have been, except to the most superficial observers, enough to make him desist from his disentangling, and stand charmed and almost awed at the gifts the advance of years had brought her which so vastly out-valued the mere smoothness of line and brightness of colour that they had taken away. They with the losses and griefs that had visited her had taken so little in comparison with the love and the patience and the proved unconquerable serenity which they had brought her. Nor, except that for the moment, when heat and physical fatigue lay like a mist over her face, dimming the inward brightness of it, had they robbed her of the lighter gifts of the spirit, humour and the appreciation of the kindly merriment that to cheerful souls runs through the web of life like some gold thread in the windings of a labyrinth. High moral courage and simple faith are without doubt essential to noble living on whatever scale, but it is only the puritanically minded who would discount the piquancy that an appreciation of the comical aspects of a world, possibly tragic, gives to the business of life. And a certain sparkle in Mrs. Lathom's grey eyes, a certain twist in her mouth clearly betokened that she was quite capable of laughing at those she loved when they behaved in a ridiculous manner. In the end without doubt a deeper-abiding tenderness would overscore her amusement, but she would never commit the error of blindly spoiling her idols.

But her ten minutes' rest was over, and she got out of her cupboard the materials for supper, and went out onto the landing where stood the gas-stove that browsed on inserted pennies. Mercifully it stood near the window that looked out on to Sidney Street at the top of this shabby genteel house, and the generous fumes grafted on to the faint odour of oil-cloth and a more pronounced smell of other culinary operations on some lower storey did not hang in stagnation on the landing. Outside on the pavements and roadway shadowed by the houses, children, not quite gutter-snipes, but markedly a little lower than the angels, played about with the eked-out contrivances of childhood, a pair of ill-running skates shared between two, a small box on wheels which would hold a baby, and cabalistically labelled squares drawn on the paving-stones. Opposite there were no houses, for a stiff church stood in an acre of disused graveyard. Rather sad and spiritless marriages used sometimes to be officiated there, and on Sunday a great clamour of four bells brought together a sparser congregation than so much noise seemed to deserve. Over all lay a grey heat-hazed sky.

Somehow the gas-stove with its accompanying odour of oil-cloth and another supper below, in which it was now clear that fish was an ingredient, was more encouraging than those symbols of worship and mortality. The gas-stove promised supper anyhow, and supper is a symbol that life not only is not extinct, but that it demands to be maintained, and Mrs. Lathom turned to the kettle from which steam was beginning to spurt, and put her saucepan on the bars of the top of the range. Simultaneously a motor-car hooted outside, and appeared to draw up, still throbbing, at the house. Then there came an impatient roulade on the bell, and the moment after the leap of active ascending feet on the staircase. It was impossible to mistake that tread: nobody in the house but Reggie came upstairs like a charging brigade, and yet how should Reggie have taken a motor from Paddington? It could scarcely be that Charles was ill, that there had been some accident, for then surely he would have telegraphed: nor did these flying feet sound like the bearer of ill news. But she left her gas-stove and went to the head of the stairs, not exactly expecting ill-news, but wanting to know.

Reggie flung himself upon her in his usual tornado of welcome.

"Oh, Mother, things have happened," he said, "and Charles hasn't decided whether Berkeley Square or Grosvenor Square is the nicest, and so he'll leave it to you. Yes, quite right: I'm mad, and I've kept the taxi because Charles orders you to drive out with me and have supper somewhere. It's his treat. To come to the point, he has sold his picture right off the easel for sixty pounds—I said pounds—and it seems that's only the beginning."

"Oh, my dear!" said Mrs. Lathom.

"I know I am, so put on your hat. Goodness, how hot the house is, and oil-cloth and fish and cheese don't smell as good as Thorley Weir."

Berkeley Square and a ticking waiting taxi and a supper at a restaurant, while the root of the matter, the fountain head of all this glory was just sixty pounds, made up an admirable example of the Charles-Reginald attitude towards money. Both of them seemed to regard it, the moment that there was any immediate superfluity of it, as a thing to be got rid of as soon as possible. This Mrs. Lathom continuously and earnestly and not very successfully tried to combat: a future rainy day, in the opinion of her sons, was not worth a moment's thought if the present day was a fine one. But at this moment Mrs. Lathom also gloriously desired the swift rush through the air, the sense of shaded lights and tinkle of ice, for she was not in any way immune from the temptations of these sub-celestial pleasures. And it was with not any very great firmness that she resisted.

"It's too dear of Charles to have ordered all these nice things," she said, "but my darling it's out of proportion even to such a fortune as sixty pounds, for us to go to a restaurant. Send the taxi away, like a good boy: I was just beginning to cook your supper."

Reggie shook his head.

"Can't be done," he said. "Charles' orders and my promise to obey them are binding. And the taxi is a-ticking out the sweet little twopences."

Mrs. Lathom made one more effort.

"But it's ridiculous," she said, "and supper will be ready in two minutes, and oh, Reggie, I am longing to hear all about the sixty pounds. And there are strawberries: I separated them, so that they should not spoil each other."

"We will eat them when we come back," said the inexorable Reggie. "I shan't tell you a word about the sixty pounds unless you come. I promised Charles. I heard another twopence go then."

A little puff of air came upstairs laden and flavoured with oil-cloth and fish which would not positively improve if kept, and the curious "poor" smell that dwells in houses where in winter the windows are not very often opened for fear of losing the warmth so expensively procured when coals are high. Mrs. Lathom's resolution wavered.

"One of us has to give way," she said. "Please let it be you, Reggie."

"Can't be done. The taxi is working awful quick, mother."

All opposition collapsed.

"Oh, I will get my hat, you monster," cried she. "It's exceedingly wrong of me to come, and for that very reason I am going to enjoy it all the more. How I long to hear about the sixty pounds! Put out that dreadful gas-stove, darling: we will stop all the tickings."

Charles duly arrived next morning with the picture, not yet quite dry, on the seat opposite him propped up by a melon which he had felt compelled to buy for his mother. Reggie had already gone off to his desk at Thistleton's Gallery when he arrived, and she was at work with her typewriter, and had not heard his step above the clacking of the busy keys. She turned as the door opened, with surprise and welcome on her face, and rose, pushing herself up with a hand on the arm of her chair. A hundred times and more when he came home of an evening had Charles seen her in exactly that attitude, with all that love and welcome beaming in her face, but to-day she took his eye in a way she had never done before. The artist in him, not the affectionate son only, perceived her. He paused in the doorway without advancing.

"Oh, you picture!" he cried. "How is it I never saw you before. You are my next model please. Mother, darling, here I am! The melon, yes, that's for you, and the picture, that's for Mr. Craddock, and me, well, I'm for both of you."

Charles deposited these agreeable properties.

"And Reggie has told you all there is to be told, I expect," he said, "but unless I'm mistaken there'll be much more to tell when I've seen Mr. Craddock to-morrow morning. He's coming to my studio at ten, and I'm sure things are going to happen. What I don't know. A commission to copy a Reynolds perhaps, other things perhaps, who knows? But my next picture is going to be you: you with your typewriter, just getting up as you did this moment, because Reggie or I came in. Lord, how often have I seen you do that, and yet I saw it for the first time to-day. Now I must go and put my studio in order in preparation for to-morrow, but I shall stop and talk to you for ten minutes first. Yes: that's Reggie just going to take a header into the Weir. Dappled like a horse, and spotted like a frog, he says, but if you won't tell anybody, there's some devilish good work in it. I happen to know because I put it there. Clever handling in the modelling of the 'Nood,' as Bonnat used to call it when he talked English, and as for the light and shadow on his blessed shoulders, I call it a wonder. And if I'm not deceived it'll be Thorley Weir he's just going to dip into. Oh, mother, I've grown silly with happiness."

They sat down together on the shabby shiny American cloth sofa, which Reggie said was guaranteed to slide from under the securest sitter in ten minutes.

"It's a new world," he went on, "just because somebody who, I am sure, knows, tells me I can paint, and has already shown himself willing to back his opinion. You don't know what a nightmare it has been to me all this year, to be earning nothing while you and Reggie were supporting me."

She laid her thin white hand on his brown one.

"Ah, my dear, do you think I haven't known all along?" she said. "Couldn't I see you struggling to keep your heart above water, so to speak? All this year, my darling, you haven't chattered, as you chattered just now."

"I suppose not. But I mustn't chatter any more. I've got to get my studio arranged, and all my bits of things stuck out for Mr. Craddock to see. I wonder what he wants to come down to see everything for. If it had been about this Reynolds' copy only he could have asked me to bring a couple of bits of work up to him. Mother, he is such a good sort: he was so friendly over it, and considerate and understanding. I shall come back as soon as I've dusted and cleared up. It won't take long."

She glanced at the sheets on her desk.

"I think I shall come and help you," she said, "and when we've put things to rights, I will go on with my work in your studio, dear, if I shan't be in the way. It gets so baking hot here in the afternoon."

"Hurrah! And while you work I shall begin the world-famed picture of the artist's mother."

"I think you owe yourself a holiday, dear, after finishing that other picture."

"Pooh! Who wants holidays when he's happy? We'll bring the melon and the typewriter and the picture along, and have a jubilation."

Charles' studio was but a few hundred yards away down a side street leading off the Brompton Road, and had not it been called a studio it might not have been misnamed an attic. Four flights of dark and carpetless stairs led to it, and its garniture was of the most rudimentary kind. Carpet and curtains it had none: a dishevelled screen and torn blind shut the light, when so desired, from its southern facing window, but in the opposite wall was a big casement giving the rayless illumination from the north. In one corner the skeleton which had been arranged in an attitude of dejected thought by Reggie on his last visit here, had a straw hat tilted back on its skull, on a shelf by it were casts of a skinless man with flayed muscles, and three or four reproductions from Greek antiques, an easel, a rough square table and three or four cane-backed chairs in various stages of disrepair completed the furniture. In one corner a cupboard let into the wall was masked by a ragged curtain which bulged suspiciously. Thither Mrs. Lathom's housewife eyes were led, and she drew it aside with a contumelious finger.

Horror was revealed: she had scarce believed that any cupboard could contain so appalling a catalogue of evidence to prove the utter incapability of a man to live, when left to himself, in a way consistent with self-respect or tidiness or cleanliness. She had not been to his studio for a month past, and to-day she would cheerfully have sworn that for all these weeks Charles had

never touched the cupboard except to stow away in it some new and disgraceful object. Crockery and knives and forks, some clean, some dirty, were lodged there, there were twisted and empty tubes that had contained colour, there was a hat without a brim and a jug without a handle, irregular shapes done up in newspaper, bottles of medium, tin tacks, sheets of paper with embryonic sketches, painting rags, half-used sticks of charcoal, remains of food, remains of everything that should have been cast into the dust-bin.

It was a withering face she turned on Charles.

"I should not have survived it if Mr. Craddock had seen in what a pig-sty you choose to live, Charles," she said. "I should have died of shame. It's little work I shall do this morning in the way of typewriting. Water and dusters and a scrubbing-brush, please."

Charles twitched the curtain over the cupboard again. Something fell behind it as he did so, and his mother groaned.

"It's little work you shall do in the way of cleaning up my messes," he said. "There's a charwoman about who brushes and scrubs and makes everything resplendent for half-a-crown per resplendency. On my word of honour she shall dust and clean. But you might help me to dust my sketches and put them out, mother. I got her to tidy-up once, and she wiped off a complete oil-sketch which was still wet."

Mrs. Lathom looked round.

"Of course I will," she said, "but oh, Charles, what squalor! A torn blind, and a broken screen, and three chairs all of which want reseating. And to think of Reggie and me last night stuffing ourselves at a restaurant with your money."

"Where shall we sup to-night?" asked Charles, bringing out a pile of canvasses.

"At twenty-three Sidney Street. Give me a duster. My dear, what a quantity of paintings."

An hour was sufficient to make Charles' private view presentable, and to display all his sketches, finished and unfinished, round the wainscot of his walls. Then without pause he put a new canvas on his easel, and bribed by his promise not to spend more than five shillings on their supper to-night, Mrs. Lathom consented to abandon her own work for an hour and sit for him. He put her typewriter on the table, and made her rehearse.

"It's like an instantaneous photograph," he said, "at least that is what the picture is going to be like. Oh, do attend, mother, and not look at the skeleton. Reggie stuck it there with a straw hat on it: it doesn't matter. You may dust it afterwards. Now! Tinkle with your typewriter, and then all of a sudden Reggie or I come in here to your right, and you put your hand on the arm of your chair, and get up saying, 'Gosh, what a surprise and how nice!' Does your poor mind take that in at all? It's rather important."

Mrs. Lathom sat down in obedience to this peremptory son. She clacked her machine, and turned woodenly round, with a smile as wooden as her gesture.

"No, not at all like that," said Charles. He had set his easel up, and was waiting with poised charcoal. "Can't you manage to get up, as you did when I came in this morning? Exercise your imagination. Look surprised! Will you try again? You are working hard with your typewriter: is that clear? You are thinking that there is a debt of sixty pounds to clear off, and that Reggie is very ill. Then on a sudden the door opens, here to your right, and Reggie comes in, quite well, bursting with health, and a stack of sovereigns. Do attend, think of what I tell you to think of. Then you get up, and say 'Darling Reggie!' I shall say, 'One, two, three,' and then do it, and then stop just in the position I have told you. Never mind about your face."

Charles took up his charcoal again, and stood with hand poised.

"One, two, three," he said.

She got up, and the seconds added themselves into minutes. There was no sound at all except the dry grating of the charcoal on the canvas. Otherwise the austere stillness of the actual creation of art filled the room. Once again, as on the morning of yesterday, Charles knew his hand was attuned to his eye, and his eye attuned to the vision that lay behind it. Rapidly and unerringly the bold strokes grated across the canvas. Then they ceased altogether.

"You beautiful woman," said Charles. "I've got you. You can't escape me now."

Then his face which had been grave and frowning lit into smiles.

"Mother darling," he said. "I'm going to make such a queen of you with your shabby old dress and your eyes of love. Now for a treat you may dust the skeleton for ten minutes, and then you must give me your face again. I see it: I see it all."

He rummaged behind the terrible curtain, and found a palette and a couple of brushes. He squirted onto it worm casts of colour, and filled his tin with turpentine.

It was a medium-sized canvas he had chosen, about three feet six by three feet, and with big brushfuls of colour very thinly laid on, he splashed in the dull neutrality of greys and browns to frame his figure, making notes rather than painting. A blot of black indicated the typewriter, and then with greater care he filled in the black of her dress, and smeared in the white of the apron she wore with body colour. This took but ten minutes for his bold brush, and then standing a little back from it, he half-closed his eyes and looked a long time at it to see whether the value of background to figure, and figure to background, were as he meant them to be. He did not want the figure to jump out from its place, for even as she rose to greet the incomer with that face of

loving welcome, her left hand still hovered with fingers outstretched over her typewriter. It had to be felt that the greeting over, her work must occupy her again. She had not detached herself from it, for all the leaping-forth of her heart in shining eyes and smiling mouth. As yet the figure was a little too near the spectator, a little too far off from its background, and while he puzzled over this the solution struck him. A little more emphasis given to the chair, the arm of which she grasped gave him what he wanted: she belonged to the chair and it anchored her in her place.

Charles suddenly threw back his head and laughed.

"Oh, jolly good!" he exclaimed, "and I don't care if nobody else agrees with me. Mother, leave that silly skeleton, please, and get back to your place. You may sit down, but turn your face towards me, and remember that Reggie is just coming in, and you've thought he was ill and——"

Charles' voice suddenly ceased, and he stared at his mother as she obeyed these instructions with eyes as of some inspired seer. Very slowly his hand moved to his brush which he had laid down, very slowly and quietly as if afraid of startling away the vision which he saw, he mixed his paint, and laid on the first brushful in planes of colour bold and firm and defined. Between the strokes he paused a long while, but the actual application was but the work of a second. But it was in these pauses when he stood with drooping mouth, head thrust forward, and eyes that seemed as if they burned their way into that beloved face that his work was done. To record what he saw was far less an effort than to see. The insight was what demanded all the fire and effort and imagination which possessed him. He had set himself to divine and to show what motherhood meant.

For half an hour he worked thus, he, too absorbed for speech, she wise enough not to risk an interruption. Then from mere fatigue of brain and eye with this sustained white-heat effort, he felt his power of vision slipping from him, and laid his palette down.

"Come and look at it," he said to his mother.

The face was but roughly put in as yet, but the spirit of the face was there.

"Oh, Charles, dear," she said. "That is just how I love Reggie and you. How did you guess?"

He took her face in his hands and kissed her.

"Guess? I didn't guess," he said. "You told me: your face told me."

Charles was not to be induced to leave his picture while daylight lasted, but he wheeled it round with its face to the wall, before he shut up his studio for the night. He was not sure whether he wished Craddock to see it in its present stage: somehow, it seemed to him private, not for everybody, until it had been clothed, so to speak, in paint. He felt shy, though at the same time he told himself he was merely fantastical at exhibiting so crude a confidence ... and while he was in two minds about it next morning, he heard his visitor's footstep on the bare and creaky staircase outside. The last flight of steps as he knew well was a mere trap to the ignorant, with the darkness of it, and its angles and corners, and he set his door wide to give light to his visitor. Then, just before Craddock came in, he told himself he was ridiculous in imagining that there could be privacy in a portrait, and wheeled the easel round so that it stood just opposite the door.

Craddock, large and white and gently perspiring, emerged from the stairs with outstretched hand, and—

"Good morning, my dear fellow," he said. "It is very well for Art to sequester herself and live alone, but four flights of break-neck stairs are really an exaggerated precaution against intrusion. However, here I am——"

Suddenly he caught sight of the portrait and he dropped Charles' hand without another word, and stared at it. The silent seconds grew into a minute, and more than a minute passed without a sound. Hard and commercial and self-seeking as Craddock was he had the saving grace of true reverence for genius, and there was not the smallest question in his mind that it was a master's work that stood before him. There was no need to ask who was this tired and beautiful woman, for no one but her son could have painted a woman so, and have divined that unique inimitable love that no woman ever felt even for husband or lover, but only for those who have been born of her body and her soul. It was that tenderness and love, no other, that Charles had seen, and for none but a son could it have glowed in that worn and lovely face.

Craddock was immensely touched. He had expected a good deal from this visit to Charles' studio, but he had never dreamed of so noble, and simple a triumph, as that unfinished portrait presented. And when at length he turned to Charles, his eyes were moist, and he spoke with a simplicity that was quite unusual to him.

"That is very true and beautiful," he said. "You are fortunate to have a mother to love you like that."

Charles gave an exultant laugh.

"Then I have shown that?" he asked, his shyness entirely vanishing before this penetrating person. Where was the point of being shy when a man understood like that?

"Indeed you have," said Craddock. "And you have shown it very tenderly and very truly. It required a son to show it."

He looked again at the eager welcoming face on the canvas, and from it to the face of the boy beside him, and asked himself, impatiently, what was this mysterious feeling of perception that underlay and transcended all technique. Here was a portrait with perhaps two days' work only (it happened to be less than that) expended on it, and even now it had arrived at a level to which mere technique could never lift it. Love and the inspiration that love gave it caught it up, gave it wings, caused it to soar.... Yet how, why? There were hundreds and hundreds of artists, who as far as mere technique went, could paint with the same precision and delicacy: why should not any of them have put on the brushful just so? Yet even in the most famous of all portraits of the artist's mother, there was not such a glow of motherhood.

Then he turned from it abruptly. He had not come here merely to admire, though he hoped that he should admire. He had come on a business proposal, which should satisfy both himself and the young man to whom it was made, and he began examining the smaller canvases which Charles and his mother had displayed round the room. Here were a couple of studies of Thorley Weir, here half a dozen sketches of Reggie prepared to take his plunge, with details thereof, a raised arm, a bent knee, the toes of a foot pressed heavily in the act of springing. There were copies of casts, there were portraits and numerous transcriptions of leg-bones, arm-bones, ribs, with muscles, without muscles, and all betokened the same indomitable resolve to draw. Then there were the copies or bits of copies from masterpieces in the National Gallery: half a dozen heads of Lady Hamilton as a Bacchante, and in particular Philip IV. of Spain, quantities of Philip IV.—his head sometimes, sometimes a dozen of his left eyebrow with the eye beneath: his right hand, a finger of his right hand, the thumb of his right hand: could they have been put together like the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision, there would be a great army of Philip IV. And in none was there any sign of impatience: the Argus of eyes was drawn for a purpose; and till that purpose was achieved, it was evident that the artist was prepared to go on copying eyes until his own were dim. Admirable also was the determination to achieve the result by the same process as that employed by the master: to get the general effect was clearly not sufficient, else there would not have been so copious a repetition.

An examination of a quarter of these delicate copies was sufficient for Craddock's purpose in looking at them. His only doubt was whether it was not mere waste of time to give this youth more copying work to do. But the study of a picture so admirable as Wroughton's Reynolds could hardly be waste of time for anybody. Also, he was not sure whether his involuntary tribute to the unfinished portrait had not been too strong: he did not wish Charles to think of himself as one with the world at his feet.

"I see you have got a sense of the importance of copying method," he said, "and I feel sure you will be able to produce an adequate copy of the Reynolds I have in mind. Now you will see why I told you to leave your camp at Thorley Weir unbroken, for the picture in question is at the house a little lower down the river, the Mill House. Probably you know it: the lawn comes down to the water's edge."

Certainly Charles knew it. Involuntarily there sounded in his brain a song he knew also, "See the Chariot at Hand." Decidedly he knew it. But an infantine caution possessed him, and he raised and wrinkled his eyebrows.

"I think I do," he said. "Is there a big tree on the lawn? And are there usually some dogs about?"

"Yes, and a charming young lady who looks after them. Now I can't offer you very much for the work, but if £50 tempts you at all, I can go as far as that. I should not recommend you to do it at all, if I did not think it would be good for you. What do you say?"

Charles drew a long breath.

"I—I say 'yes,'" he remarked.

"Let us consider that settled then. I will telegraph for the exact size of the picture, and you can take your canvas down. I should start to-morrow, if I were you. Ah, and talking of £50, here is another specimen of £50 which I already owe you. I advanced you ten, did I not? I will take my picture away with me if I may."

The crisp crinkling notes were counted out, and Charles took them up and stood irresolute. Then by an effort the words came.

"You can't know," he said, "what you've done for me, and I feel I must tell you——"

The notes trembled and rustled in his hand.

"You've given me hope and life," he said. "I—I don't think I could have gone on much longer, with the others working and earning, and me not bringing a penny back. You've done all that. You've put me on my feet."

Craddock felt for his whisker in silence a moment. To do him justice there was a little struggle in his mind, as to whether he should put the proposal he had come here to make, or do what his better self, the self that revered the unfinished portrait, prompted him to do. Yet for a year now this boy had been toiling and struggling unaided and undiscovered. None of all those who must have seen him copying in the National Gallery had seen what those eyes of Philip IV., those repeated fingers and thumbs implied: none had ever suspected the fire and indomitable patience of those admirable sketches. It was but just that he, who had recognised at once what Charles already was and might easily become, should reap the fruits of his perspicuous vision. And the offer he was about to make would seem wildly generous too to his beneficiary.

"My dear Lathom," he said. "I hope to put you much more erect on your feet. I haven't said

anything of what I came to say. Now let me put my whole proposal before you."

He paused a moment.

"It is quite impossible for you to continue in your studio here," he said. "You are a painter of portraits, and what sitter will come up those stairs? Your admirable portrait of your mother will certainly be seen next year, at some big exhibition, and certainly people will enquire for the artist. But it is mere folly for you to live here: You must be more accessible, more civilised. Some fine lady wants to be painted by you, but will she survive, or will her laces survive these stairs? Will she sit on a chair like this for an hour together, and look at a torn blind? I know what you will say: quite sensibly you will say that you can afford nothing better. But I can afford it for you. I will start you in a proper studio, well furnished and comfortable, and as it should be. Why, even a dentist has a comfortable chair for his sitter, and a waiting-room with papers, and a servant who opens the door."

Again Craddock paused, for he had caught sight of the unfinished portrait again, and felt desperately mean. But the pause was very short.

"I will start you decently and properly," he said, "and I will not charge you a penny. But I want a return, and you can make me that return by your paintings. I propose then that you should promise to let me have a picture of yours every year for the next three years at the price of £100. Do you understand? In a year's time or before, I can say to you, pointing to a picture, 'I will take this for this year.' I can say the same next year: I can say the same the year after. You get your studio and all appurtenances free: you also get a hundred a year for certain, provided you only go on painting as well as you paint now. I shall get three pictures by you at a price which I honestly believe will be cheap in three years' time. I tell you that plainly. I think your pictures will fetch more than that then."

Craddock caressed the side of his face a moment.

"I shall also," he said, "have had the pleasure and the privilege of helping a young fellow like yourself, who I believe has a future in front of him, to get a footing in that arena, where attention is paid to artistic work. I have a certain command of the press. It shall assuredly be exercised on your behalf. You have heard of struggling geniuses. I do not say you have genius, but you have great talent, and I shall have enabled you to work without the cramp and constriction of poverty as you paint. Now, you need not tell me now what you decide. Think it over: talk it over with that beautiful mother, whom I hope I may see some day. It is just a business proposal. On the other hand, if you feel no doubt as to your answer, if you are going to tell me to go to the deuce for certain——"

Charles took two quick steps towards him.

"I accept," he said, "how gladly and thankfully I can't tell you. But you might guess ... I think you understand so well ..."

Craddock, laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Then there's our little private bargain," he said. "Tell your mother and that bathing boy, of course. But we'll not talk about it otherwise. Our little agreement, yours and mine. I don't think we shall either of us repent it."

"It won't be me who starts repenting," said Charles joyously.

CHAPTER IV.

Charles was in camp again at the little peninsula fringed with meadow-sweet and loosestrife below Thorley Weir, scarcely hearing, far less listening to its low thunder, diminished by the long continuance of the drought, scarcely seeing, far less looking at the dusky crimson behind the trees which showed where the sun had set. Probably his unconscious self, that never-resting observer and recorder of all the minutest unremembered incidents of life, saw and took note, but though his eyes were open and his ears alert, his conscious brain was busy with what concerned him more vividly than those things. Besides, in a way he had already made them his own; he had painted them half a dozen times in sketches and studies, he had guessed their secret, learned the magic of their romance, and they were his. All that was not his, all the life that was expanding and opening about him, could not but claim and receive this surrender of his brain and his heart.

He had come back here two days ago, and on the morning following, had presented his card at the Mill House to a parlour-maid who had taken it in, leaving him and the canvas easel and paint-box he had brought with him to grill at the door. This rather haughty young person returned after a while and bidding him follow, took him upstairs into what looked like a disused nursery, overlooking the lawn and river, and pointed at a picture propped against the end of a sofa.

"Mr. Wroughton hopes there is everything you require," she said, "and please to ring if you want anything."

She rustled out of the door, which she closed with elaborate precaution, exactly as if Charles had fallen into the sleep which was necessary for his recovery.

Charles' grave grey eyes had been twinkling with amusement, as he was thus led through an empty house, and stowed away like a leper, in this sequestered chamber, and, left alone, a broad

grin spread over his face. Then before looking at the picture which stood with its face towards the end of the sofa, his eye made an observant tour of the room. Certainly it had been a nursery, for here stood a doll's house, here a child's crib, here a chair with a confining bar between the arms, so that no child imprisoned there could by any means escape. But there were signs of a later occupancy, a couple of big arm-chairs, and a revolving book-case stood there also, on the top of which evidently in recent use lay a writing-pad with ink-bottle and pen-tray attached. Also there was that indefinable sense in the air, manifest subtly but unmistakably that the room was still in use....

A rap at the door which indicated not "May I come in?" but "I am coming in," interrupted this short survey, and the parlour-maid entered. She cast a vulturine glance round the room: she saw and annexed the writing-pad. But again before leaving she spoke like a Delphic oracle up-to-date.

"If you desire to rest or smoke there is the garden," she observed.

Now Charles had already drawn his conclusions about the room, and he resented the removal of the writing-pad by anybody but its owner. For it required but little constructive imagination to reform the history of this room. Surely it had been the nursery of the girl of the punt, and was still used by her as a sitting room. She ought to have come and got her blotting-pad herself. However, she had done nothing of the sort, and in the meantime it was his business not to dream dreams, but see and reproduce another painter's vision. He took hold of the picture that stood against the end of the sofa, turned it round, then gave a short gasp of amazement. For here was the girl of the punt, inimitably portrayed. Just so and in no other fashion had she turned opposite their tent, and looked at Charles while his brother execrated that which should have been an omelette. There was no question that it was she: there was no question either that it was a superb Reynolds.

Instantly the artistic frenzy awoke: the dream that lay deep down in his young soul, dim and faint and asleep, seemed suddenly to awake and merge and personify itself in the treasure that it was his to copy. Instantly the whole room, too, burst into life, when this prototype of its owner was manifested. Nor, apart from the sweet and exquisite pleasure that it gave him to work here, had the room been badly chosen: there was an excellent north light and by drawing down the blinds of the window opposite, he could secure exactly the illumination he required. In five minutes he had adjusted his easel, and with his canvas already mapped faintly out into squares to guide his drawing, the charcoal began its soft grating journeys.

For a long time he worked on in one absorbed pulsation, and was just beginning to feel that his arm was momentarily unable to continue without some pause for rest, when an interruption unlooked for and for the moment inexplicable occurred. A faint continued scratching, not impatient but entreating, came at the door, and rightly rejecting the first idea that had presented itself to him, that the indomitable parlour-maid, suddenly brought low, besought admittance, Charles opened to the intruder. A big golden collie stood outside, who sniffed at him with doubt and hesitancy, and then deciding that he was harmless, came softly by, and established himself on the sofa. Established there in the haven where it would be, it thumped gently with its tail, as a signal of gratitude.

Charles stood with the open door in his hand a moment, but it seemed impossible to continue drawing into the passage, so to speak, and with a tremor of anticipation in his wicked young heart, he closed it again. A parlour-maid could remove a writing-pad, but it might easily require someone with greater authority to entice away that other possession. Then before going back to his work, he tested the friendliness of his visitor, and finding he was welcome, spent a minute in stroking its ears, and received as thanks a rather dry hot nose thrust into his hand. Clearly the dog was not well, and with that strange canine instinct, was grateful for the expression of even a stranger's sympathy. Then it lay down with muzzle on its outstretched paws, and eyes wide-open and suffering and puzzled. Charles went back to his canvas, but he expected further interruptions now.

In a little while they began. Through the open window on the side towards the river, where he had drawn down the blind, he heard a footstep on the gravel path below, a whistle, and then a voice calling "Buz!" Buz heard too, for he pricked a languid ear, and just moved a languid tail, but did not feel equal to a more active recognition. Again and once again Buz was whistled for and called, and it seemed to Charles that he was in the position of an unwilling accomplice, who had better turn King's evidence. So as quietly as he could, he pulled up the blind and looked out. Below on the grass stood Buz's mistress, and perhaps the whisper of the blind had caught her listening ear, for on the moment she looked up, and saw Charles at the window.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but I was shown up here, and I think it must be Buz who asked to come in. He is lying on the sofa."

There was a sudden surprise in the girl's face: it might only be due to being thus addressed by a stranger from the upper storey. But as a matter of fact, it was not a stranger quite who addressed her: she perfectly recognised him, though the surprise was there.

"Oh, thank you," she said. "I will come up to fetch him."

Charles stood there waiting, with his blood somehow strangely a-tingle and alert. It seemed to him as if this had all happened before, yet he could not remember what happened next. But it all seemed very natural. Then he heard her quick step on the stairs and she entered.

She smiled at him rather remotely but not without friendliness, and certainly without embarrassment.

"Thank you so much," she said. "I could not find him. Buz, dear, come along."

She stood in the doorway, with head already half-turned to leave the room again, just as in the hundred-year old portrait of her. Buz tattooed languidly with his tail.

"I'm afraid he is not very well," said Charles, with the sense of taking a plunge. "His nose is hot and dry."

"I'm afraid so. The dogs always think of this room as their sick-room if they don't feel what's called The Thing. Buz, come along."

Buz thought not.

"But won't you leave him here?" said Charles.

Joyce came a couple of steps into the room.

"Oh, I hardly like to," she said. "Won't he disturb you?"

"Not an atom. Do leave him if he feels like stopping. He doesn't object to me."

That last sentence won Joyce's heart: it was easy to reach it through her dogs. But she detached herself from Charles again, as it were, and went up to her ailing dog.

"Buz, darling, I'm so sorry," she said. "You can stop here if you like. Not quite well? Oh, I'm afraid not well at all."

She bestowed a kiss on Buz's head, who wrinkled puzzled eyebrows at her. It appeared she could not help him, and he did not understand.... Then she turned to Charles again.

"Please forgive my interrupting you," she said. "And weren't you painting below Thorley Weir a week ago? Yes: I thought it was you."

Before he had time for more than the bare affirmative, she had left the room again. And all the way downstairs she mingled with compassion for Buz, a wonder why she had felt as if she could not help asking that, although she was perfectly certain it was he.

It was characteristic of Charles that he flew to his drawing again, for that expressed his feelings better than any mooning reverie would have helped him to do. He must draw, he must draw, just as an eager young horse must run, to give outlet to the life that rejoices in its limbs. Besides, each moment of industry brought him nearer to the painting of the face and the half turned neck. But before he began again, with Buz's permission, he kissed the top of his flat golden head, and went to his work with a heightened colour, feeling a little ashamed of himself.

Perhaps an hour passed, while from the house came no sound at all nor any from the room where Charles worked, except the scrape of his charcoal, and the rather quick uneasy breathing of the dog. Then came an interruption which did not excite him in the least, for he had not forgotten the manner of access peculiar to the parlour-maid.

"Will you be working here this afternoon, sir, Mr. Wroughton wants to know," she said. "And if so will you take some lunch?"

Charles' foolish heart leaped.

"I should be delighted to," he said.

Again silence descended. Then, with a heart that leaped down again, he heard a subdued clink on the stairs. It was even so—then re-entered the parlour-maid with a neat tray on which was set an adequate and austere refreshment. And as Charles ate his excellent cold mutton and rather stringy French beans, he grinned largely at his mental picture of himself as the prisoner in solitary confinement, who might take exercise in the prison yard when he wanted to smoke. But Buz shared his confinement, and the apparition of Buz's mistress was not unknown. By and by he would take his exercise.... And then again the glory of the Reynolds portrait, the exquisite satisfaction, too, of being able to see, from his studies in the National Gallery, the manner of its doing, and the knowledge that he could, owing to his long and careful practice, put on the paint somewhat in that manner, swallowed up his entire consciousness again.

A gong sounded from below, and Buz from mere force of habit, knowing this was dinner-time, got off his sofa, before he realized that dinner was of no use to him. He went but a few steps towards the door, then turned, and sat down in front of Charles, seeking his eyes with his own, mournful, not understanding, mutely beseeching to know what was the matter, asking him to help. Charles tried to convey comfort, and Buz acknowledged his efforts by a few heavy sighs breathed into his caressing hands. Then walking stiffly and painfully he went back on to his sofa again. But Charles felt as if he had been taken into the poor beast's confidence: Buz had enlisted him to give such aid as was possible.

The room had grown very hot in the last hour with the unflecked outpouring of the sun on its roof, and Charles thought with a touch of not more than secondary rapture of the cool liquid embrace of his weir. But a more primary ecstasy was in the foreground, and putting aside his charcoal, he could not resist getting out his paints and rioting with loaded brushfuls over the expanse of the faded blue of the sky that toned into pale yellow above the low horizon to the right of the picture. On the left rose a thick grove of dark serge-clad trees against which was defined that exquisite head, and to which there pointed that beckoning hand. Who was the unseen to

whom she beckoned with that gracious gesture, yet a little imperious? To what did she beckon him? Perhaps only—and that would be the best of all—to a saunter through the twilight woods with her alone, away from such crowds as might be supposed to throng the stone terrace, seen glimmeringly to the front of the picture, to a talk, sitting on the soft moss, or on some felled tree-trunk, in low voices, as befitted the quietness of the evening hour, to an hour's remission from the gabble and gaiety of the world. Or was it he, the unseen onlooker, who had asked her to give him half an hour ... he had something he wanted to tell her—Charles could picture him in his satin coat and knee breeches, stammering a little, a little shy—something for her ear alone....

Then the mere quality of the splendid work struck and stung him afresh. What depth of clear and luminous twilight was tangled among the trees that cast tides of long shadows, clear as running water over the lawn! The grass had been painted first, and the shadow laid over it.... It was impossible not to daub in some of that. No one had ever *seen* quite as Reynolds saw, not quite so simply and comprehensively. And then suddenly despair benumbed his fingers: it would be a profanity, were it not so grotesque to think of copying such a wonder. And at that Charles became aware that both hand and eye were thoroughly and deservedly tired. Also that he had a searching and imperative need for tobacco. It was decidedly time to seek the prison yard.

The sun had ceased pouring in at the window when he had raised the blind to turn King's evidence with regard to Buz, and now a cooler breeze suggestive of the coming of evening sauntered in. It was this perhaps that had refreshed the sick dog, for when Charles opened the door Buz shambled off the sofa and followed him downstairs. There was no difficulty about finding the way into the garden, for it lay straight in front of him at the foot of the stairs, and still seeing no signs of life, he crossed the lawn and walked on a grass path down between two old yew hedges, Buz still at his heels, towards the river. Then turning a corner he stopped suddenly.

On a low chair sat a very old lady. Suitably to this hot day she was dressed in a little print gown, with a linen sunbonnet, and looked exactly like the most charming of Kate Greenaway's gallery. She was employed, without the aid of spectacles, on a piece of fine needlework that looked rather like baby-linen but was probably for her own embellishment; Joyce, full length on the ground, was reading to her.

She instantly dropped her work. Never, in all her life, had she failed to make herself agreeable to a good-looking young man, and she was not going to begin now. Joyce had half-raised herself also and gave Charles a half smile of welcome, which she augmented into a most complete one when she saw Buz.

"Buz, dear!" she said.

Lady Crowborough did not quite say "Charles, dear," but she easily might have if she had known his name.

"Joyce, introduce him to me," she said.

Joyce looked at Charles, raising her eyebrows, and quite taking him into the confidence of her smile and her difficulty.

"It's the——" she nearly said "boy," but corrected herself—"it's the gentleman who is copying the Reynolds, granny," she said. Then to Charles, "May I introduce you to Lady Crowborough."

Lady Crowborough held out her little smooth thin hand.

"Charmed to see you," she said. "Of course, I knew what my silly granddaughter has told me. Such a to-do as we've had settling where you were to paint, and where to stow all Joyce's bits of things, and what not."

Charles had excellent manners, full of deference, and void of embarrassment.

"And my name's Lathom," he said, as he shook hands.

"Well, Mr. Lathom, and so you've come out for a breath of air," continued the vivacious old lady. "Get yourself a chair from the tent there, and sit down and talk to us. Only go quietly, else you'll wake up my son, who's having a nap there, and that'll cause him indigestion or perspiration or a sinking, or I don't know what. Perhaps Joyce had better get it for you: she won't give him a turn, if he happens to wake."

"Oh, but I couldn't possibly——" began Charles.

"Well, you can go as far as the tent with her, while she pops round the corner and carries a chair off, and then you can take it from her. But mind you come back and talk to us. Or if you want to be useful you can go to the house and tell them I'm ready for tea, and I'll have it here. Ring the first bell you see, and keep on ringing till somebody comes. The whole lot of them go to sleep here after lunch. Such a pack of nonsense! What's the night for, I say. And then instead of dropping off at the proper time, they lie awake and say a great buzzing, or a dog barking, or a grasshopper sneezing prevented their going to sleep."

Charles went swiftly on his errand, and accomplished it in time to join Joyce outside the tent and take the chair from her. Already the comradeship which naturally exists between youth and maiden had begun sensibly to weave itself between them: in addition Charles had been kind to Buz and seemed to understand the significance of dogs.

"It was good of you to let my poor Buz stop with you," she said. "He has adopted you, too, for he came out when you came, didn't he?"

"Yes: I hope he feels better. What's the matter?"

"I don't know, and the vet doesn't know, and the poor lamb himself doesn't know. He's old, poor dear, and suffers from age, perhaps like most old people, except darling Grannie. I shall send for the vet again if he doesn't mend."

They had come within earshot of Lady Crowborough, who was profoundly indifferent to the brute creation. She preferred motors to horses, mousetraps to cats, and burglar-alarms to dogs. She was equally insensitive to the beauties of inanimate nature, though her intense love, contempt, and interest for and in her fellow creatures quite made up for these other deficiencies.

"Now you're talking about your dog, Joyce," she said. "I'm sure I wish he was well with all my heart, but if his life's going to be a burden to him and you, I say, put the poor creature out of his pain. A dab of the stuff those murderers use in the East End and the thing's done. I say the same about human beings. Let the doctors do the best they can for them, but if they're going to be miserable and a nuisance to everybody, I should like to put them out of their pain, too. Give 'em time to get better in, if they're going to get better, but if not snuff them out. Much more merciful, isn't it, Mr. Lathom? I hope they'll snuff me out before I'm nothing but a mass of aches and pains, but they haven't got the sense, though I daresay they'll so stuff me up with drugs and doctor's stuff that I shall die of the very things that were meant to cure me."

Joyce giggled.

"Darling Granny!" she said. "You wouldn't like it if I came to you one morning and said, 'Drink it down, and you'll know no more.'"

"Well, I'm not a nuisance yet with rheumatics and bellyache," observed Lady Crowborough. "Lor', the medicine your father takes would be enough to sail a battleship in, if he'd collected it all, instead of swilling it, and much good it's done him, except to give him a craving for more. Why, when I was his age, a good walk, and leave your dinner alone if you didn't want it, was physic enough. But I've no patience with all this talk about people's insides. It's only those who haven't got an inside worth mentioning, who mention it. And did you come all the way back from your tent in the heat, Mr. Lathom, to go on painting this afternoon?"

"Oh, no," said Charles, "they very kindly sent me a tray up with some lunch on it."

"And you sat there all by yourself, mum as a mouse, and ate up your tray?" she asked. "You don't do that again, mind! You come and talk to me at lunch to-morrow. I never heard of such a thing! Joyce, my dear, pour out tea for us. I want my tea and so does Mr. Lathom. I warrant he got nothing for lunch but a slice of cold mutton and a glass of sarsaparilla if your father had the ordering of it. Now I hear you live in a tent, Mr. Lathom? Tell us all about it. Ain't you frightened of burglars?"

"There's nothing to steal except a tin kettle and me," said Charles.

"Well, that makes you more comfortable, no doubt. Joyce, my dear, it's no use giving me this wash. Put some more tea in, and stir it about, and let it stand. I like my tea with a tang to it. And your tent doesn't let the rain in? Not that I should like to sleep in a tent myself. I like my windows closed and my curtains drawn. You can get your air in the daytime. The outside air is poison to me, unless it's well warmed up in the sun. But I should like to come and see your tent."

She regarded Charles with strong approval: he was certainly very good to look upon, strong and lean and clear-skinned, and he had about him that air of manners and attentiveness which she missed in the youth of to-day. He sat straight up in his chair when she talked to him and handed her exactly what she wanted at the moment she wanted it.

"Ah, but do come and see it," he said. "Mayn't I give you and Miss Wroughton tea there some afternoon? I promise you it shall be quite strong."

"To-morrow," said Lady Crowborough with decision. "I'll go in the punt for once, and Joyce shall push me along."

Charles excused himself soon after, in order to get another hour of his work, and he was scarcely out of earshot when Lady Crowborough turned to Joyce.

"Well, my dear," she said. "I don't know what you've done, but I've fallen in love with that young man. And to think of him having his lunch all alone, as if he was your father's corn-cutter or hairdresser. When Philip awakes, he shall know what I think about such rubbish! Where's my cup? I don't want to tread on it as I did yesterday. Why, Mr. Lathom's put it back on the table for me!"

"I think he's a dear," said Joyce. "And he was so nice to poor Buz."

"Don't begin again about your dog now," said Lady Crowborough, "though I daresay Mr. Lathom has been most attentive to him and no wonder."

With which rather Delphic utterance, she picked up her needlework again, while a smile kept breaking out in chinks, as it were, over her face. For though she liked presentable young men to be attentive to her, she liked them also to be attentive to any amount of their contemporaries. Young men did not flirt enough nowadays to please her: they thought about their insides and that silly Scotch golf. But she had noticed the change of expression in Charles' respectful eyes when he looked at Joyce. She liked that look. It was many years since she had seen it directed to her, but she kept the pleasantest recollection of it, and welcomed the sight of it as directed at

another. And in her opinion, Joyce well deserved to have a handsome young fellow looking at her like that, she, so strictly dieted on the somewhat acid glances of her father. A little judicious flirtation such as Lady Crowborough was quite disposed to encourage, would certainly brisken the house up a bit. At present, in spite of her own presence there, it seemed to have no more spring in it than unleavened bread.

Next day, according to the indisputable orders of Lady Crowborough, Charles had taken his lunch with the family, and though Philip Wroughton had thought good to emphasize the gulf which must exist between his family and a young man who copied their portraits for them, by constantly using the prefix "Mr." when he spoke to Charles, the meal had gone off not amiss. Irrespective of Lady Crowborough there was the inimitable lightness of youth flickering round it, a lightness which Joyce by herself felt unable to sustain, but which instinctively asserted itself when a little more of the proper mixture was added. Afterwards Charles had paddled back to his encampment in order to prepare for his visitors, and soon after, while Philip slept the sleep of the dyspeptic, his daughter and mother left in the manner of a riverside Juliet and a very old nurse, to go to what Lady Crowborough alluded to as "the party." She had dressed herself appropriately in a white linen frock with little rosebud sprigs printed on it, and an immense straw hat with a wreath of rose to embellish it. She had a horror of the glare off the water, which might cause her to freckle, and wore a thick pink veil, which, being absolutely impenetrable, served the additional purpose of keeping the poisonous air away from her. Her whole evergreen heart rejoiced over this diversion, for not only was she going to have tea with her handsome young man—"my new flirt," as she daringly called him—but, having had a good go of flirtation herself, she was prepared to encourage the two young people to advance their intimacy. Most of all she hoped that they would fall in love with each other, and was then prepared to back them up, for she had guessed in the twinkling of an eye that Craddock had Philip's consent in paying attentions to Joyce, and with her sympathies for youth so keen, and her antipathy for middle-age so pronouncedly contemptuous, she altogether recoiled from the idea of Joyce ever having anything to do "with that great white cream-cheese" as she expressed it to herself. She found the cream-cheese agreeable enough at lunch and dinner to give her the news of the town, and a "bit of tittle-tattle" in this desert of a place, but she had no other use for him, either for herself or her granddaughter.

Charles received them at the edge of his domain, ankle-deep in forget-me-nots, and conducted them a distance of three yards to the shadow of his tent where tea was spread. There were two deck-chairs for the visitors, the box of provisions with a handkerchief on the top for table, and a small piece of board for himself. He had pinned up against the tent side two or three of his sketches, and his sole tumbler stood by the tea things with a bunch of forget-me-nots on it. He made no apologetic speeches of any description about the rudimentary nature of the entertainment, because he was aware that he had nothing else to offer them. Besides the tea was strong, and there was a pot of strawberry jam.

"Joyce'll be saying she must live in a tent, too," remarked Lady Crowborough withdrawing her veil. "Upon my word, Mr. Lathom, I like your dining-room very much. That thicket behind cuts the beastly wind off. That's the colour I like to see tea."

"It's been standing a quarter of an hour, Lady Crowborough," said Charles with his respectful glance. "Are you sure it's not a little—well—a little thick?"

"Not a bit—Joyce and you may add water to yours if you like. And are those sketches yours? They seem very nice, though I don't know a picture from a statue."

She looked at them more closely.

"And has Joyce been sitting to you already?" she asked, in a tremor of delight. (They *had* been sly about it!)

The ingenious Charles looked mightily surprised.

"Oh, that?" he said, following her glance. "That's only a little water-colour sketch I did of the head of the Reynolds picture. But it is like Miss Wroughton, isn't it?"

It was indeed: so for that matter was the Reynolds.

Lady Crowborough was a little disappointed that Joyce hadn't been giving clandestine sittings, but she knew as well as Charles himself that he had executed this admirable little sketch with Joyce, so to speak, at his finger-tip, and not her great-great-grandmother, and her new flirt rose higher than ever in her estimation.

"And when will you have finished your copying?" she asked.

Here again Charles did not fail.

"I can't possibly tell," he said. "When I came down I imagined it would take a week or ten days, if I worked very hard. But I see how utterly impossible it will be to do it in anything like that time. But it's lovely work. I don't care how long it takes."

"Bless me, how sick and tired you'll get of it," said she.

"Not if you'll come and have tea with me, Lady Crowborough," said this plausible young man.

Lady Crowborough grinned all over: she knew just how much this was worth, but she liked it being said.

"Well, anyhow this American, Mr. Ward, is quick enough about his part of the bargain," she said. "My son received his cheque this morning, sent by your friend Mr. Craddock, Joyce, my dear.

Five thousand pounds! There's a sum of money!"

Charles paused a moment, some remembrance of an American and a cheque for £5000 stirred in his brain, without his being able to establish the connection.

"What? Has he got it for five thousand pounds?" he asked.

"Yes: plenty, too, I should say, for a bit of canvas and a lick or two of paint on it. I'm sure when you have finished his copy none of us would be able to tell the one from the other. Isn't five thousand pounds a good enough price, Mr. Lathom?"

"Well, it's a very good picture," said Charles.

Joyce was watching him, and saw the surprise in his face.

"Why did Mr. Craddock send father the cheque?" she asked.

"Lord, my dear, I don't know," said Lady Crowborough. "Cheques and Bradshaws are what I shall never understand. I suppose it was what my bankers call drawn to Mr. Craddock. His name was on the back of it anyhow. Whenever I get a cheque, which is once every fifty years, I send it straight to my bank, and ask them what's to be done next, and it always ends in my writing my name somewhere to show it is mine, I suppose. But as for Bradshaw, it's a sealed book to me, and I send my maid to the station always to find out."

Suddenly Charles remembered all about this American and the cheque for five thousand pounds, and the slight film of puzzle, uncertainty, though nothing approaching suspicion, rolled off his mind again. Reggie a week ago had mentioned the drawing of this post-dated cheque at Thistleton's Gallery. It was all quite clear. But undoubtedly this Mr. Ward had obtained his picture at a very reasonable figure. Then, as if to abjure what had never been in his mind, he spoke, not more warmly than his heart felt, about Craddock.

"Mr. Craddock has been tremendously good to me," he said. "It's scarcely a week ago that he first saw me, when I was painting here one afternoon, and you brought him by in the punt, Miss Wroughton. The very next day he bought my picture off my easel——"

"Well, I hope he gave you five thousand for it, too," said Lady Crowborough.

Charles beamed at her: she had finished her second cup of positively oily tea, and was smoking a cigarette with an expression of extreme satisfaction.

"He did more for me than that, Lady Crowborough," he said, "he gave me a chance, a start. Then he came to see my studio, and gave me the commission to paint this copy. And then——"

Charles' simple soul found it hard to be silent, but he remembered Craddock's parting admonition.

"And then, my dear?" asked Lady Crowborough.

"Then he's made me feel he believes in me," he said. "That's a lot, you know, when nobody has ever cared two straws before. By Jove, yes, I owe him everything."

Certainly her new flirt was a charming young fellow, and Lady Crowborough saw that Joyce approved no less than she. She felt he was probably extremely unwise and inexperienced, and would have bet her veil, and gone back veiless, the prey of the freckling sun, that Craddock had made some shrewd bargain of his own. It was now time for her flirt to have an innings with Joyce. She was prepared to cast all the duties of a chaperon to the winds, and inconvenience herself as well in order to secure this.

"Well, I've enjoyed my tea and my cigarette," she said, "and all I've not enjoyed is Joyce's punt. I shouldn't wonder if it leaked, and the gnats on the river were something awful. They get underneath my veil and tickle my nose, and I shall walk home across the fields, and leave you to bring the punt back, my dear. And if you've got a spark of good feeling, Joyce, you'll help Mr. Lathom wash up our tea things first."

And this wicked old lady marched off without another word.

Joyce and Charles were left alone, looking exactly like a young god and goddess meeting without intention or scheme of their own, in some green-herbaged riverside in the morning of the world. They did the obvious instinctive thing and laughed.

"Everyone does what darling Grannie tells them," said Joyce, "so we had better begin. The only suggestion I make is that I wash up, because I'm sure I do it better than you, and you sit down and sketch the while, because I shouldn't wonder if you do it better than me."

"But I wash up beautifully," said Charles.

"I think not. There was egg on my tea-spoon."

"I'm sorry. Was that why you didn't take sugar?"

"Yes."

"Have some now by itself?" said he.

"I think I won't. Where's a tea-cloth?" Charles wrinkled his brows.

"They dry in the sun," he said. "We thread them, tea-cups that is, on to the briar-rose."

"And the plates? Do begin sketching."

"They dry also. They are placed anywhere. But one tries not to forget where anywhere is."

Otherwise they get stepped on."

Charles plucked down the Reynolds head from the tent wall.

"I began it from the picture," he said, "but may I finish it from you? If you wash up by the forget-me-nots, and I sit in the punt, at the far end, I can do it. Oh, how is Buz to-day? He didn't come up to the nursery."

She neither gave nor withheld permission to finish the head in the way he suggested, but her eyes grew troubled as she emptied the teapot into the edge of the water. It was choked with tea-leaves, gorged, replete with them. He picked up his water-colour box, and climbed out to the cushions of the punt.

"Buz isn't a bit well," she said. "I've sent for the vet to come again to-morrow. Oh, isn't it dreadful when animals are ill? They don't understand: they can't make out why one doesn't help them. Buz has always come to me for everything, like burrs in his coat and thorns in his feet, and he can't make out why I don't pick his pain out of him."

"Sorry," said Charles, scooping some water out of the river in his water-tin, but looking at her. Their eyes met, with the frankness, you would say, of children who liked one another. But for all the frankness, only a few seconds had passed before, the unwritten law, that a boy may look at a girl a shade longer than a girl may look at a boy, prevailed, and Joyce bent over the tea-cups. She was not the less sorry for Buz, but ... but there were other things in the world, too.

"I know you're sorry," she said, "and so does Buz, and we both think it nice of you. And how long really do you think your copy will take? And what will you do if the weather becomes odious?"

"I shall get a cold in my head," said Charles, drawing his brush to a fine point, by putting it between his lips.

Joyce looked at him with horror.

"Oh, don't put the brush in your mouth!" she said. "They always used to stop my doing it at the drawing-school. Some of the paints are deadly poison."

"Oh, do you paint?" said Charles. "You ought to have painted and I to have washed up—please stop still for a moment, exactly like that. So sorry, but I shan't be a minute. Damn!"

An unfortunate movement of his elbow jerked his straw hat which was lying by him into the Thames: it caught and pirouetted for a moment on an eddy of water, and then hurried gladsomely down-stream.

"But your hat?" said Joyce in a strangled whisper, as if, being forbidden to move, she must not speak.

"I'm afraid I've already said what I had to say about that," said Charles. "Just one second."

He worked eagerly and intensely with concentrated vision and effort of its realization for half a minute. Then again he used that forbidden receptacle for paint-brushes, and dragged off the excessive moisture from his wash.

"Now I'll get it while that dries," he said.

He picked up the punt-pole and ran down the edge of the bank to recapture his hat. But it had floated out into mid-stream and his pursuit was fruitless.

"And it looked quite new," said Joyce reproachfully, on his return. "I'm afraid you are extravagant."

"Just the other way round. It would have been false economy to have saved my hat—price half-a-crown, and have risked losing the—the sight I got of you just for that minute while my hat started voyaging. But now," he said, gleefully washing out his brushes—"now that I've got you, let the great river take it to the main."

He made the quotation simply in the bubble of high spirits, not thinking of the context, nor of the concluding and following line, "No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield." But instantaneously the sequel occurred to him—for the words were set to a tune which he very imperfectly sang with his light tenor, and accompanied on his banjo.

"You talk of too many things in one breath, Mr. Lathom," said Joyce. "You said if the weather broke you would catch cold here, so of course you must go to the inn in the village, if it rains. Men have no sense: I believe you would stick on here, while you get congestion and inflammation and pneumonia. Then you asked me if I painted, and I may tell you I don't. I used to try: if I have any sketches left the sight of them would convince you of the truth of what I say."

Charles' art and heart tugged for his whole attention. For another minute he was silent and absorbed.

"Quite done," he said. "Thank you so much, Miss Wroughton."

Charles looked at her, and all thought of his art passed from him. She was entrancing, and he suddenly woke to the fact that in the last quarter of an hour they had made friends.

He came towards her, stripping the sketch off its block.

"Do let me give it you," he said rather shyly. "You see, I shall enjoy the fruits of your labour, as I shan't have to wash up. It's only fair that you should have the fruits of mine—at least if you would care for them at all."

She could not but take in her hand the sketch not yet dry which he held out to her, and looking at it, she could not but care. Never was there anything more admirably simple, never had an impression been more breezily recorded. There was no attempt at making a picture of it; there were spaces unfilled in, a mere daub of hard edged blue in the middle of the sky was sufficient note to indicate sky: the weir was a brown blob, and a brown blot of reflection and a splash of grey, as if the brush had spluttered like a cross-nibbed pen, showed where the water broke below. Against it came the triumphant painting of a head, her own on the head in the Reynolds picture, but so careful, so delicate—and for the rest of her there was a wash of stained blue for her dress; a patch of body colour, careless apparently, but curiously like a tea-cup against it. At her feet was a scrabble of blue lighter than her dress, but none could doubt that this meant forget-me-nots ... they were like that, though the scrabble of pale blue seemed so fortuitous. Probably Charles never painted more magically than in those ten minutes, even when the magic of his brush had become a phrase in art criticism, a *cliché*. There was all that a man can have to inspire it there, and the inspiration had all the potential energy of the bud of some great rose. It had the power of the full blossom still folded in it, the energy of the coiled spring, the inimitable vigour of a young man's opening blossom of love.

It was no wonder that she paused when he handed it to her. Her own face, her own slim body and gesture, as he saw her, leaped at her from the sketch, and she thrilled to think, "Is that what he sees in me?" No array of compliments, subtly worded, brilliantly spoken, could have told her so much of his mind. It was an exquisite maiden that he saw, and that was she. She could not but see how exquisite he thought her: she could not fail to glow inwardly, secretly, at his view of her. Those few minutes' work, at the cost of the straw hat, came as a revelation to her. He showed her herself, or at least, he showed her how he saw her. The insatiable and heaven-born love of all girls to be admired shot in flame through her. Now that she saw his sketch, she knew that she had longed for that tribute from a man, though till now she had been utterly unconscious of any such longing. Mr. Craddock when he proposed to her lacked all spark of such a flame; had even he but smouldered—She knew she was loved. That in itself seemed almost terrifyingly sufficient. She let herself droop and lie on it, on the thought of it ... it was transcendent in its significance.

Her scrutiny lasted but a moment. Then from the sketch she looked back to Charles again, him who had seen her like that.... And had she possessed his skill of brush, and could have painted him, there would have been something in her sketch, as in his, of the glimmering light that trembles high in the zenith when the day of love is dawning. Back and forth between them ran the prelude tremor, a hint, a warning of the fire that should one day break into full blaze, fed by each; but to the girl, at present, it was but remotely felt, and its origin scarcely guessed at. To him the tremor was more vibrant, and its source less obscure; the waters were already beginning to well out from their secret spring, and he beginning to thirst for them.

The moment had been grave, but immediately her smile broke on to it.

"Oh, that is kind of you," she said. "I shall love to have the sketch. And I retract: it was worth a lot of straw hats to do that. Perhaps you have not even lost one. I may overtake it on its mad career as I go back home. I will rescue it for you, if I come across it, and give it first aid. I must be getting back now. Thank you ever so much for the delicious tea, and the delicious sketch. You will be at work again, I suppose, to-morrow morning?"

Such was the history of the two days, which Charles revolved within him that evening, after he had eaten his supper and sat out by the water-side, unwitting of the dusky crimson in the west, and the outpouring weir. Things fairer and more heart-holding than these absorbed and dominated his consciousness.

Day by day his copy of this wonderful Reynolds wonderfully grew beneath the deftness and certainty of his brush. Though he had said that it would take much longer than he had originally contemplated, he found that he was progressing with amazing speed, and though he would gladly have worked more slowly and less industriously so as to lengthen out the tale of these beautiful days, it seemed to be out of his power to keep back his hand. He was dragged along, as it were, by the gloriously-galloping steeds of his own supreme gift: once in the room opposite the portrait, he could no more keep his fingers off his brush, or his brushes off his canvas, than could a drunkard refrain, alone with his cork-drawn intoxicants. Nor could he, for another and perhaps more potent reason, keep away from the house where the picture was, or after a reasonable morning's work lounge away the afternoon on the river. By cords he was drawn to the Mill House, for there was the chance (of not infrequent fulfilment) of meeting Joyce: and then he had to go to his extemporized studio, and the other frenzy possessed him.

But poor Buz had no pleasures in these days and as they went by the old dog grew steadily worse. He was a constant occupant of the sofa, where he had established himself on the first morning of Charles' occupation, and if he was not, as was generally the case, in his place when Charles arrived of a morning, it was never long before there came at the door the request for admittance, daily feebler and more hesitating. Charles had to help him to his couch now, for he was too weak to climb up by himself, but he always managed a tap or two with his tail in acknowledgment of such assistance, and gave him long despairing glances out of dulled topaz

eyes, that expressed his dumb bewilderment at his own suffering, the abandonment of his dismay that nobody could help him. Once, on entering, Charles found Joyce kneeling by the sofa, crying quietly. She got up when he entered, and openly wiped her eyes.

"I'm so glad you don't think me silly," she said, "for I feel sure you don't. Other people would say, as darling Grannie does, 'It's only a dog.' Only! What more do you want?"

Charles laid a comforting hand on Buz's head, and stroked his ears.

"I could easily cry, too," he said, "for helplessness, and because we can't make him understand that we would help if we possibly could. What did the vet say yesterday?"

Joyce shook her head.

"There's no hope," she said. "There would have to be an operation anyhow, and probably he would die under it. He wouldn't get over it altogether in any case. He's too old. Mr. Gray told me I had much better have him killed, but I can't bear it. I know I ought to, but I am such a beastly coward. He sent a bottle and a syringe this morning. There it is on the chimney-piece. I can't bear that the groom or coachman should do it, or the vet. And I can't do it myself, though it's just the only thing that I could do for poor darling Buz."

Charles turned from the dog to her.

"Let me do it, Miss Wroughton," he said. "I know what you mean. You can't bear that a stranger like a coachman should do it. But Buz always liked me, you know, and rather trusted me. You mean that, don't you?"

Joyce gave a great sigh.

"Yes, oh, just that," she said. "How well you understand! But would you really do it for me?"

Charles went across to the chimney-piece, and looked at what the vet had sent.

"Yes, it's perfectly simple," he said. "I see what it is. I did it for a dog of my own once. It's quite instantaneous: he won't feel anything."

"And when?" said Joyce piteously, as if demanding a respite.

"I think now," said Charles. "He's dying: he won't know anything."

Joyce bit her lip, but nodded to him. Then she bent down over the sofa once more, and kissed Buz on his nose, and on the top of his head. Then without looking at Charles again she went out of the room.

This aroused Buz, but before many minutes were past he had dozed off again. Then Charles filled the little syringe, wiped the end of it, so that the bitterness should not startle him, and gently pushing back the loose-skinned corner of his lip he inserted the nozzle, and discharged it. A little shiver went through the dog, and he stretched out his legs, and then moved no more at all.

Charles went to the door, and found Joyce standing outside.

"It's all over," he said. "Buz felt nothing whatever."

Joyce was not up to speaking, but she took his hand between both of hers, pressing it.

CHAPTER V.

A dark October day with slanting flows of peevish rain tattooing on the big north window of Charles' new studio, was drawing to a chill and early close, and the light was rapidly becoming too bad to paint. His mother, at whose picture he had been working all day, was sitting in front of the plain deal table from his old studio, with fingers busily rattling on her typewriter, and Charles had put his easel on the model's-stand and worked from this elevation, since the figure in the picture was looking upwards. It was nearing completion, and the last steps which were costing him so much biting of the ends of his brushes, and so continual a frown that it seemed doubtful if his forehead could ever again lose its corrugations, were being taken, and his progress which up till now had been so triumphantly uninterrupted was beginning to shuffle and mark time. Admirable though the wistful welcoming love in her face was, thrice admirable as Craddock had thought it, Charles knew now it did not completely represent what he saw. All day he had been working at it, making his patient model keep rising and looking at him, and not only was he dissatisfied with the inadequacy of it, but he knew that he was losing the simplicity and brilliance of his earlier work on it. Hence these knottings in his forehead, and the marks of teeth in the handles of his brushes.

"Mother, darling," he said, "stand up once more, will you, and that will be all. Now!"

By incessant repetition she had got the pose with unerring accuracy, and she pushed back her chair and rose facing him. He looked back from her to his canvas, and from it back again to her, and the frown deepened. It was not the best he could do, but he could not better it by patching and poking at it. For one moment he wavered; the next he had taken up his palette knife and with three strokes erased the whole of the head. Then he gave a great sign of relief.

"Thank God, that's done," he said, "and to-morrow I will begin all over again. I was afraid I wasn't going to do that."

"My dear, what have you done?" she asked, leaving her place and coming to look. "Oh, Charles, you've scraped it all out."

"Yes, thank God, as I said before."

"But when Mr. Craddock saw it this afternoon he said it was so wonderful."

"Well, I daresay it wasn't bad. But if Craddock thinks that I'm going to be content with things that aren't bad, he's wrong," said Charles. "It'll be time for me to say 'That will do,' in twenty years from now. For the present I'm not going to be content with anything but the best that I can do, and that wasn't the best, and that is why there's that pat of paint on my palette knife, and no head on your dear shoulders."

Mrs. Lathom still looked troubled.

"But he had ordered it, dear," she said. "He had chosen it as the picture he was going to buy from you this year."

Charles rapidly turned on all the electric light.

"I don't care a straw," he said. "Nobody is going to have pictures of mine that aren't as good as I can make them. I see more than I saw when I painted it first, and I couldn't inlay that into it. Your face isn't a patch-work counter-pane. No, we begin again. Now, mother dear, do be kind and toast muffins for tea, while I give the place where your head was a nice wash-down with turpentine, so that there's no speck of paint left on it. Reggie's coming in, and as soon as we've got greasy all over our faces with muffins we'll go and stand in the queue at the theatre. We shall have to go pretty early. 'Easter Eggs' is a tremendous hit and the pit's always crammed."

Charles scrubbed away at his canvas for a minute or so in silence, beaming with satisfaction at his erasure of the head.

"I'm blowed if we stand in the queue at all," he said. "As a thanks-offering for my own honesty, I shall go and get the three best places that are to be had. Now I won't be thwarted. I shall get fifty pounds this week for the Reynolds copy, and I choose, madam, I choose to go to the stalls. I will be economical again to-morrow for weeks and weeks. Hulloo, here's the child. Reggie, come and look at my picture of Ma. Haven't I caught the vacant expression of her face quite beautifully? I think I shall let Craddock have it just as it is, and he can call it 'The guillotine at play.'"

"Charles, you are the most tiresome——" began his mother.

"I know: I touch the limits of endurance. But I am pleased to have wiped your face for you. I shall want you at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. Goodness, how it rains! I am glad I'm not going to stand outside for a couple of hours."

Reggie had subsided into a large chair, and was toasting his feet at the fire.

"Mother's morose," he said, "when I was prepared to enjoy myself. She always was a kill-joy. Mother, darling, you shouldn't indulge in these melancholy fits. Consider what a great girl you are. Consider anything, but put lots of butter on the muffins. Charles, history repeats itself. Mr. Ward—opulent American, you know—came in again to-day with Craddock, and again he drew a cheque at my desk, and again, though I lent him my pen, he didn't tip me. He must be indecently rich, because to-day he gave Craddock a cheque for ten thousand and one hundred pounds."

"What had he bought?"

"Dunno. Some little trifle for the servants' hall I suppose. Ten thousand for the picture, one hundred for the frame, do you think? Oh, another thing: there was a long notice in the 'Whitehall' about the Exhibition at the 'British Painters and Etchers.' I brought it home. It says all kinds of things about the picture of me. Here it is: catch hold."

Charles snatched at the paper with all a boy's natural pride in being for the first time noticed in the press. Nor was the morose Mrs. Lathom less eager, for with muffin on toasting-fork she left the fire and read over his shoulder, and the moroseness vanished.

"Oh, Charles," she cried, "'Brilliant achievement—masterly technique—the gem of a rather mediocre exhibition—figure of a graceful stripling.'—Reggie, my graceful stripling, that's you—'a new note in English painting'—You darlings, what a pair of you! I should like to know who wrote it. I wish the people would sign their names."

But as Charles read his first impulse of pleasure faded altogether. At the end he crumpled the paper up, and threw it into the fender.

"Good Lord, what rot!" he said.

"Lays it on thick, doesn't it?" said Reggie. "But I like the part about the graceful stripling."

"You would," said Charles.

The studio which was part of Craddock's bargain with Charles was admirable in design and appointment. A huge sky-light, set in the slope of the roof, looked towards the north, and an apparatus of blinds made it easy to get as much or as little light as was required. The walls were of that most neutral of all tints, the grey-green of the underside of olive leaves, and the parquet floor had a few sober-hued rugs over it. But colour was there in plenty: a couple of brilliant screens, one of lacquer, one of stamped Spanish leather, intercepted possible draughts, and gave a gorgeous warmth of hue to their neighbourhoods, and a big open fireplace with Dutch tiles, and

a little congregation of chairs round about it, added to a mere workroom a delightful focus of rest and comfort. The faithful skeleton and the flayed man kept each other company in a sequestered corner, where they might be supposed to entertain each other with dismal tales of how they came to be what they were, for the room was no longer the study of a student, but the living-place of a practitioner. Beyond these things there was little to attract the attention, or seduce the eye, for the vision that comes from within must feed on what it suggests to itself, and not be tickled with what others have done and thought.

At the time when Craddock had made his offer to Charles, the room, with its little chamber adjoining, was already in his hands, and he had thought of using it as an overflow gallery from Thistleton's, but he had drawn a longer bow in offering it to Charles, for his speculation there he believed to hold a larger financial possibility than an extension of Thistleton's promised. And his furnishing it, in accordance with what he thought to be Charles' psychical requirements, was not less than masterly. Morning by morning, when Charles arrived there, he felt instinctively that he saw clearly here, that his own vision was unharassed by things that were ugly and inconvenient, and yet not distracted by the challenge of beauty that demanded attention. In this temperate, colourless place he grew as plants grow on warm grey days, not soaked or scorched, but realizing themselves, and expanding accordingly to their own irresistible vitality. A month ago, Charles could not have scraped out the face that to-day he so joyfully erased from his canvas. No doubt these utterly congenial conditions did not produce his development, but they presented nothing that hindered. Above all, the constant gnawing at his heart of the thought that he earned nothing, contributed nothing to those who worked for him, was removed. To some natures such conditions are a spur, to him they had only been a drag. They had never retarded his industry, but they had always caused him that inward anxiety which, though he knew it not, shackled the perfect freedom of his service to art. To-day he had no touch of such cramp or stiffness: he felt entirely untrammelled: his soul stood nude and unimpeded, like some beautiful runner or wrestler. There was nothing to hinder its leap and swiftness.

Arthur Craddock had been exceedingly busy this autumn; indeed, since the month that he had spent at Marienbad during August, when he atoned for the plethora of nourishment which he had taken during the year before, and cleared his decks, so to speak, for action again, he had hardly spent a night out of town. The bulk of his work was in connection with the production of "Easter Eggs," for, since he knew that no acting manager would look at it, for not containing a star-part, or if he did, would quite infallibly spoil it by making a star part out of it, he, on rather a magnificent scale of speculation, had taken a theatre himself, and himself engaged the actors whom he desired to see in it. These were without exception ladies and gentlemen who had not hitherto been so fortunate as to attract attention; for this reason their services were more cheaply secured, which was an advantage, but the corresponding disadvantage was that they were not possessed of any great histrionic experience, and thus needed the more drilling and instruction. Craddock had engaged an excellent stage-manager, who fully entered into his conception of the manner in which the play must be presented, but there was scarce a rehearsal at which he was not himself present, and after which he did not confabulate with his stage-manager. Sometimes from the incessant hearing of the scenes, they seemed to him to lack all significance and dramatic force, and be, as their despairing author had openly avowed them, the merest twaddle. But even when hope burned lowest, and Craddock seriously wondered how great would be the loss he would have to face, he still stuck to his opinion that there were marketable elements in this quiet drama.

He had another cause for financial disquietude. During the summer there had been an outrageous exhibition of post-Impressionists at one of the London galleries, and though from an artistic point of view he considered that these nightmare canvases had as little to do with art as the "tasteful" decorations of a saloon-carriage, he had through an agent made very considerable purchases of them, with a view to unloading again on the confiding public. Since his return from Marienbad he had caused them to be hung in Thistleton's gallery, and had written several signed articles in the "Whitehall" which he considered should have proved provocative of purchasers. But up to the present the gallery had been barren of buyers, and even though himself pointed out to Mr. Ward, to whom his recommendation had hitherto been always sufficient, the marvels of this new mode of vision, and masterly defiant absence of all that had hitherto been known as drawing or painting, the latter, though lamenting his artistic blindness, had altogether declined to make breaks in the frieze of nightmare which brooded on the gallery walls. But though for the present his money—a considerable sum of it—was locked up in these monstrous and unmarketable wares he did not (which would have affected him far more poignantly), lose prestige as a critic and appraiser of art, since he had bought under an agent's name, and the secret of his identity with Thistleton's Gallery was at present inviolate. His astute young clerk, as has been seen, had conjectured as much, but it was only a conjecture, and the conjecturer was only Reggie. Had Craddock known of Reggie's brotherhood to his new protégé, he might perhaps have devoted a little thought as to whether he should take any steps to ensure secrecy: as it was he neither knew Reggie's name, nor suspected his conjecture or relationship.

A third disagreeableness had chequered September for Craddock, and added a further burden to his anxieties during the weeks of rehearsal for this play. Four years before he had purchased one of his convenient options on the literary work of a slow-labouring and diabolically-canny Scotchman, who had failed to find a publisher for a story which Craddock had judged to be a very beautiful and delicate piece of work. He had given this execrable Pict the sum of three hundred

pounds for it, coupled with the right to purchase any future work by him during the next three years for the same sum. Whereupon the execrable Pict, having made quite sure that he had mastered the terms of his agreement, had sat down in his frugal house in Perthshire and devoted himself to study and porridge and reflection. For those three years he had not set pen to paper, but lived a life of meditation that would have done credit to a student of Râja Yogi attaining Samâdhi, and, the period of his apprenticeship to Craddock being finished and the contract terminated, had written a book over which, when it was published during September, the whole world, it seemed, had laughed and wept. Never was there a more tender and exquisite idyll, reviewers hailed him as Scotland's most transcendent sun, round which all lesser lights must for ever burn dim. Hot and hot the editions poured from the press, and Craddock, impotent and dismayed, saw the little fortune which he felt was justly his pour into the purse of this disgusting Northerner. The execrable Pict was a Danae. He sat with gold showering round him, the gold that he had acquired in those three years when he sordidly lived, thanks to Craddock's bounty, on porridge and meditation. Craddock had not, it will be observed, lost money over this unfortunate transaction, since he had more than gathered back his original outlay, but the thought of what he had missed woke him early in the morning, after the remembrance of the last rehearsal had prevented his going to sleep at night. Legally, he believed he might be judged to have some claim, since the book in question was, if not blackly written with ink on paper, invented and thought over and prepared during those years in which he had a claim on the author's work, but for personal reasons he did not desire that this pathetic history should be exposed to the unsympathetic ventilation of the law-courts. But it confirmed to him the wisdom of doing business, wherever possible, with the young and inexperienced.

Though these financial clamours were loud round him, Craddock was not so distracted by them as to neglect his interests in the work of his new artist, and it says much for his equanimity in troublesome times that, between these discouraging rehearsals, and the contemplation of the execrable Pict and the unmarketable post-Impressionists, he devoted his full attention to the furnishing of such a studio for Charles as would give him the best possible conditions for work. He himself chose its furniture and embellishment: he sat with his white face on one side and his little eyes half-closed to select the colour for the walls: he himself pulled the blinds up and down over the big north light to make sure that this novel system of springs worked smoothly. He did not, of course, go so far as to believe that a suitably-appointed studio can do anything whatever towards the ripening of a possible genius, but his own thoroughness and common-sense told him that when you are dealing with a brain and hand so sensitive as that of a true portrait-painter, it is the falsest economy to spare either money or trouble in securing for him the best possible conditions for his work. And when, this afternoon, he paid a visit to the studio, an hour before Charles triumphantly and joyously expunged that sweet and tender face from his canvas, Craddock thought himself justified.

It will be readily understood that among this multiplicity of ventures and perplexities, Craddock had little time or psychological stuff to devote to the girl who, it is not too much to say, had brought a new type of emotion into his life. But though he had no time to address himself actively to thoughts of her, her image lived somewhere in the background of his mind, without loss of vividness. Indeed, without volition on his part, it seemed to be gently soaking into the businesses with which he was more acutely concerned, so that, for instance, even when his brain was most attentive to some lugubrious rehearsal, he would see himself and her with perhaps Lady Crowborough as chaperone, and Frank Armstrong as perspiring author, seated in the stage box on the night of the first representation. Perhaps he would not ask Armstrong: as there was a fierce rugged kind of strength about him that a girl might possibly find attractive.... But, such is the blindness with which ironical fate smites her puppets, no such qualms with regard to Charles, who had, so he had learned, stayed at the Mill House, on Lady Crowborough's invitation, for a week after the summer had broken in torrential rain, towards the end of July, ever entered his head.

Then only a week ago, for the date of production had to be postponed and yet again postponed until the rehearsals went with a smoothness that no friction disturbed, came the first night of "Easter Eggs," and before the evening was half over the conduct of the execrable Pict, and the apparent permanence of the post-Impressionist pictures on the walls of his gallery, had been smoothed out of Craddock's mind, as a wrinkle in the sand is erased by the incoming tide. From the first moment the simple and brilliant little play, with its neat construction and well-etched delineation of character, charmed and captivated the house. It was not necessary for the audience to put too strenuous a call on their intelligences, and, as Craddock had foreseen, they found an entertainment much to their minds in watching and enjoying the unfolding of the unpretentious but absorbing little chronicle. It had something of the fragrance of Cranford about it, and its gaiety was of some little bonneted Quakeress, suddenly moved to dance in a shy decorous manner. Nor did the faint patronizing blame and praise of the critics next morning disturb him in the slightest: he knew well from the manner of its reception, and the pleased chattering crowd that waited for their vehicles in the lobby when the last act was over that he need have no fear for the solidity of its first night's success. Being a critic himself, he knew how seldom his colleagues spotted the right horse. Indeed, the only jarring note was the attitude of the sardonic author, when, subsequently, he supped with the owner, and in reply to Craddock's congratulations returned those congratulations into his bosom. Armstrong, in fact, seemed rather vexed at the success of the evening, and Craddock remembering, for a brief moment, his own feelings on the success earned by the book of the execrable Pict, understood something of the young man's ingratitude.

Certainly the ill-luck which followed Craddock these last months—even at Marienbad the number

of pounds of the too too solid which he had lost, were not what he had hoped for—seemed to have turned, for "Easter Eggs," when it had run a week, gave evidence by its advance bookings, of the security of its favour with the public, and the critics also were airily beginning to say that "they had said so all along." So, with the removal of these financial anxieties, Craddock was at leisure to turn his mind to the riverside again, and on the evening of the day on which he had visited Charles, just previous to the ruthless destruction of the head in his portrait, he went down again to Thorley to dine and sleep at Philip Wroughton's house. He had two ostensible reasons for so doing: in the first place he wanted to see Charles' copy of the Reynolds, in the second he wanted to talk over his friend's plans for the Egyptian winter. He was minded to spend a month or two in Egypt himself, and wondered whether a little judicious hinting would cause Philip to make a suggestion that he would be eager to fall in with.

He found, and was not ill-pleased to find, that Lady Crowborough was not in residence, but had gone back to town, where she was accustomed during the winter months to hermetically seal herself up, in the manner of a hibernating dormouse, in a small dark house in Half-Moon Street. But he found when the subject of Egypt was mentioned at dinner, that she had gone to town principally in order to supply herself with linen frocks and veils that should thwart the freckling powers of the Egyptian sun.

"My dear mother," said Philip, as he passed the port to Craddock, "has got it into her head that she would like to accompany Joyce and me, and when she has got any plan of any kind in her head, Joyce and I find it useless to protest. She does not listen to any arguments, nor does she reply to them. She carries out her plan. I do not entirely applaud this one. As likely as not it will be I who will have to look after her, for I am sure she will find the journey and the heat very trying. And as I planned this expedition with a view to regaining such measure of health as may be possible for a confirmed invalid, I do not quite applaud her resolution. But as I say, she is quite indifferent to applause or its absence. Sometimes I think that old people tend to become a little selfish."

He frowned slightly, as he poured himself out the water with which he was to facilitate the entry of his after-dinner cachet.

"And she will expect Joyce to be with her, and read to her and look after her," he continued, "and I shall be companionless. Shut up and condemned to an invalid life, as I have been, I find it difficult to think of anybody who might accompany us, and relieve me of the solitude which will so largely be mine. But the world in general and even one's friends, soon forget an invalid like myself. But certainly I should like, now that my mother has settled to come with us, a further addition to our party."

Philip was sufficiently astute to observe others, when he was not entirely absorbed in himself, and as he looked at Craddock now, it seemed to him that there was a certain suggestion of expectancy of tension even about him: in fact he had raised his wine-glass from the table, as if to drink, but sat with it poised, neither drinking nor replacing it.

"If only I could induce you to come with us," he said.

Craddock put his glass down.

"I think if you had not suggested that," he said, "that I should have risked a rebuff and done it myself."

He paused a moment.

"Only one thing might have deterred me," he added, "namely the fear that my presence, after what happened when I was here last, might be distasteful to Miss Joyce."

Philip waved this away with his thin white hand.

"I know that the young are often very selfish," he said, "but I do not believe that Joyce would for her own sake wish to deprive me of so congenial a companion, even if your suggestion was well-founded. But I am sure it is not. Indeed, I think your being able to come with us is a very fortunate circumstance for her, and, if I may say so, for you, as well as for myself. She will have ample opportunities for knowing you better, and appreciating you more truly. Shall we go into the next room? Ah, by the way, since you will now be seeing about your journey and your hotel accommodation in Egypt, perhaps it would not be troubling you to make arrangements for us also. My mother I know will take a maid, who will look after her and Joyce. I cannot afford a similar luxury."

The rain and gale that had clamorously wept all day, had vastly increased at nightfall, and when the two men left the dining-room they found Joyce sitting in the drawing-room with open windows in the attempt to clear the room of the smoke that had been blowing down the chimney. This rendered the room impossible for her father to sit in, and since his own sitting-room was in no better plight, Joyce was despatched to see whether her room, which was on the other side of the house and sheltered from the fury of the wind, was more tenable. Her report was favourable, and her father, coughing and feeling sure that this quarter of a minute's exposure to the open window of the drawing-room had chilled him, went upstairs with her, leaving Craddock to look at the copy of the Reynolds which hung in the dining-room. He had had dusky glimpses of it during dinner, but now when he examined it by a fuller illumination, the execution of it amazed him. Not only was it faithful in line and colour but in that indefinable quality of each which marks off the

inspired from the merely intelligent copy. There was the same gleeful mystery in that turned and radiant face ... it was as if Charles no less than the painter of the original picture had known this entrancing girl, had penetrated by his artistic insight into the joy and vitality that enveloped her. And how like she was to Joyce!

He was swift to see, and the picture did not long detain him, but on his way upstairs he very sincerely congratulated himself on the tide in his affairs that was proving so fortunate. "Easter Eggs" he already counted as a gold-mine, three pictures of Charles', one of them that admirable portrait of his mother, were enviable possessions, and there was the winter in Egypt, and the golden possibilities which it contained already his own. He determined, or almost determined, to give Charles the hundred pounds which he had received from his customer, in payment for the copy made of the Reynolds, instead of the fifty he had promised him. He could easily say that Mr. Ward had been so delighted with it that in a fit of altruistic generosity (seeing that the copy was not his) he wished to make a larger remuneration. Charles would be so ingenuously grateful, and Craddock liked gratitude and ingenuousness. They contained the elements of security.

Joyce gave him a charming welcome to her room; she had just heard from her father that Craddock would join their party.

"It is delightful that you will come to Egypt with us," she said. "A party of four is the ideal number."

There was an absence of the personal note in this, which Craddock, as he caressed the side of his face, did not fail to observe.

"Quantitatively, then, we are all right, Miss Joyce," he said. "But is the latest addition qualitatively satisfactory?"

Joyce wore raised eyebrows and a slightly puzzled smile at these polysyllabic observations. But it is probable that she understood very well.

"It is delightful that you are coming," she repeated.

Craddock might have attempted to get a more personal welcome than this, but at the moment his very observant eye caught sight of a small framed sketch that stood in the circle of lamplight on the table. Instantly his attention was diverted there, nor was it only his artistic attention that was thus captured, for in a glance he saw that this sketch concerned him in ways other than artistic. He put out his hand and drew the picture more immediately under the light, unconscious that he had not even acknowledged Joyce's repeated speech of welcome.

There she knelt in Charles's sketch, on the carpet of forget-me-nots at the water's edge. Her head was turned as in the Reynolds picture, to face the spectator, while her body was in profile. It was possible enough that Charles had begun this water-colour replica of her head from the Reynolds itself, but there were differences in it, subtle and insistent, that showed beyond all doubt that the girl had sat to him for it also. She was engaged, as to her hands, with a white blot of a tea-cup; the dish-cloth which she held in her other hand was green with reflection from the bank beside her which basked in brilliant sunshine. Behind was the weir with its screen of trees, above, a dab of blue was sufficient—neither more nor less—to indicate the serenity of the summer day. Critic to his finger-tips Craddock could appreciate, none better than he, the slenderness of the means employed to portray these things, and the adequacy. No one but a great artist would have dared to omit so much: the foreground of forget-me-nots was two mere swirls of paint, the weir a splash of brown with a smudge of grey to indicate the shadowed water, while a mere twirl of the brush showed the swift current of the river. But in the midst of these mere symbols and notes of colour was her face, and that was a marvel of portraiture, into which an infinity of care was absorbed. Of the same quality were the vague lines that showed the girl's slim body: it was she and no other who knelt among the forget-me-nots. And it seemed to Craddock that just as none but a son could have painted that portrait of Charles' mother, so none but a lover could have painted this. He saw the difference between Joyce and the Reynolds picture now; previously he had only seen the marvellous similarity. But here the blood and heart-beat of the artist throbbed in the exquisite handiwork.

But his artistic sense took the first call on his faculties.

"But a little masterpiece!" he said. "I have never seen a happier moment. That's an inspired boy!"

Philip just shrugged his shoulders at this admiring explosion.

"Ah, that little picture of Joyce," he said. "It has always seemed to me rather sketchy and unfinished. But if you admire it so much, I am sure Joyce would be delighted to let you have it."

Joyce turned quickly to her father, and for the first time Craddock saw her troubled and disturbed.

"Oh, father, I can't possibly," she said quickly. "Mr. Lathom gave it me——"

She broke off short, and her face and neck were flushed with the blood that sprang there. Then bright-eyed and rosy as the dawn she turned to Craddock.

"It is a clever sketch, isn't it?" she said. "And all the background is only three dabs and a smudge. I suppose they happen to be put in the right place. He did it one afternoon when Granny and I were having tea with him."

She gave him a few seconds more for looking, and then quickly held her hand out for it, and replaced it on the table. Then she baldly and ruthlessly changed the subject.

"I don't think you have even been up here before, Mr. Craddock," she said. "It was my nursery once, as the rocking-horse and the doll's house witness, then my school-room, as the time-table of lessons above the chimney-piece witnesses, and please let it now become your smoking-room and light another cigarette. Now do tell us about Egypt. I know darling Granny will want to stop in Cairo, and go to every dance and dinner-party."

The new topic effectively diverted her father from the channel concerning Charles and his sketch, for he was always more ready to talk about things that concerned his own comfort than any topic which was unrelated thereto. But a week in Cairo, before going up the Nile to settle down for a month's sunshine at Luxor, was not unreasonable: if Lady Crowborough desired more Cairo, there was, of course, no cause why she should not indulge herself to any extent in its pleasures and festivities. But she would be obliged to indulge herself alone: the party whose sole object was the pursuit of health for Philip, could not be expected to hamper their guest. Joyce had no inclination, so he assumed then, for gaieties like these; the temples of Karnak were much more to her mind....

Joyce left the two men before there was any sign of the discussion growing lukewarm, and went to her bedroom. This was on the other side of the house fronting the full bugling of the gale, and the maddened tattoo of the rain on her panes. It was impossible in this onslaught of elemental fury to open her windows, but she felt in the very bones and blood of her a longing for the out-of-doors, whatever its conditions. Up and down her room she walked, strangely and unwontedly excited, and had she obeyed her impulse, she would have put on a cloak, and let herself out of the house, to walk or to run, or even to stand in the blackness of the night, and the bellowing of the wind, and feel herself one with the wild simplicity and force of the storm. Better even than that she would have liked to go forth and plunge herself, naked under the hueless night, with the torrent and froth of the weir, to struggle and be buffeted by the furious water, to be herself and nobody else, not anybody's daughter, not anybody's companion, not even his with whom her soul seemed suddenly mated. She had gone out for a drenching walk to this weir only this afternoon, and had leaned over its grey wooden railing, and watched the water in flood over the promontory where a tent had stood. Below her a carpet of forget-me-nots, where she had knelt, and she could have found it in her heart to wade through the foam of the flood to kneel there again, and recapture the first thrill of the knowledge that had come to her then. That unbidden flash of desire had lightened on her but for a second, and she had instantly shoved it away again, slamming the door on it, and turning the key, and shooting the bolts. But it had been there, and to-night as she paced her room, she knew quite well what lay behind the barred doors of her consciousness, and though she had imprisoned it, giving it no bail to go abroad, she was not ashamed of it. It burned there within her, warmly radiant, and though she would not allow herself to see the light of it, she knew it to be there, and secretly exulted in the knowledge.

But she did not directly want to throw it open to herself: just now she only wanted to be herself, as she felt she would be if she could be out in the storm. She did not formulate in her mind the indubitable necessity of unlocking her inmost self in order to be herself. Illogically enough, but with a very human inconsistency, she longed for the conditions that would give her the sense of freedom, of expansion that she demanded, without contemplating that on which her whole freedom was based. Yet she knew well that against which she revolted, from which she longed to escape. In a word, it was the fact, and the implication founded on that fact, that Arthur Craddock was coming to Egypt with them. Coupled with it was the idea, so cursorily introduced by her father, that she should give Craddock the sketch that Charles had made of her. Literally, no expedition of ingenuity could have framed a more unfeasible request. There was nothing in the world she could less easily have parted with. And the suggestion was just thrown over the shoulder, so to speak, like an idle question, a meaningless complimentary speech! But now she wondered whether it was only that. Taken in conjunction with Craddock, and his bloodless wooing of her, she felt it was possible that this was in the nature of a test-question. Was it? Was it?

Once more for a moment she desired the night and the storm and the waters of the swollen river; then, instantly, she knew that all this was but a symbol of the knowledge that burned behind the closed and barred door of her mind. She seemed to have no volition in the matter: she but looked at the doors, and they swung open, and the light that burned within was made manifest. She ceased from her restless pacing of her room, and with a little sigh of recovered rest sat down at her dressing-table, and unlocked one of the drawers. It was empty but for a couple of letters addressed to her. They were quite short, and nearly quite formal. But they filled the drawer, and they filled everything else beside.

She read them.

"Dear Miss Wroughton.

"I hope the copy of the picture satisfies your father. I didn't see him before I left, and I should so much like to know that he is pleased with it (if he is). I can't tell how sorry I was to finish it, for it was such a pleasure to do it. I should so like to see it in its place, if that is possible—I often think of you and poor Buz...."

There was nothing here that the merest formalist might not have written ... only a man formalist would not have written it.

She took out the second letter.

"Dear Miss Wroughton.

"I am so glad your father likes the copy. About that silly little sketch—if you are going to frame it, I think you had better just have a plain gilt frame, and no mount. A mount will only make it look more dabby. I am busy with a portrait of my mother, and it's tremendous fun, chiefly, I suppose, because she has a perfectly darling face, and is utterly like her face. But of course any day will suit me to come down and look at the copy, and I do want to see if it is fairly satisfactory. I will come on any day and at any hour that you suggest.

"Sincerely yours,

Charles Lathom."

"P. S.—I have got into a new studio, which is lovely. Won't you be up in town sometime before you go to Egypt, and won't you come to lunch or tea? Lady Crowborough said she would, and I will ask her the same day, or if my mother came, wouldn't it do? But I should like you to see my things. It has been quite dark for days, and I suppose will be all the winter. I wish I could put my studio down in Egypt."

There was nothing here that anybody might not see. But Joyce would not have shown those letters to anybody. She felt she would have shown his heart no less than her own in showing them. And for comment on the text, if any were needed, there was his sketch of her. That was how he saw her.

All restlessness had utterly subsided: she had only been restless as long as she had wanted to be herself, without admitting to herself all that was most real in her, as long as she shut up the bright-burning knowledge that shone in her innermost heart. Now she had thrown the closed doors wide, and sat very still, very bright-eyed, with the two simple little notes on the table in front of her, desiring no more the air and the tumult of the night, but unconscious of it, hearing it no longer.

Below the drawer where she kept those letters was another also locked. After a while she opened that also, and took out what it contained. Often she had laughed at herself for keeping it, often she had scolded herself for so doing, but neither her ridicule nor her blows had stung her sufficiently to make her throw it away or destroy it. In its present condition it would have been hard to catalogue or describe. But there was no doubt that this shapeless and mud-stained affair had once been a straw-hat. She had found it drowned and pulpy just below the landing-stage of the Mill House the day after Charles had made his sketch of her.

Meantime Arthur Craddock, though glib and instructive in matters of hotels and travel, had been very deeply busy over a new condition that he felt to concern him considerably. Rightly or wrongly he believed that this boy who had painted that wonderful little water-colour of Joyce was in love with her. He could not wholly account for his conviction, but judging intuitively it seemed plain to him. And what seemed no less plain, and far more important, was the fact that Joyce peculiarly valued that sketch. No intuition was necessary here: the trouble and sudden colour in her face when she told her father that she could not possibly part with it, spoke more intelligibly than her words even. Had he known or guessed a little more, had he conjectured that even at this moment Joyce was sitting in her room with those two little notes spread in front of her, while in a drawer, yet unopened, there lurked the dismal remains of Charles' straw-hat, he might have suspected the futility of the abominable interference that he was even now concocting. For little meddling lies have seldom the vitality to enable them to prevail against needs that are big and emotions that are real. Soon or late by logical or chance discovery comes the vindication of the latter, and they assert themselves by virtue of their inherent strength: soon or late, for the air is full of thousands of stray sparks, comes the explosion that shatters such petty fabrications, the chance circumstance that blows it sky-high. But he only thought that he was dealing with the calf-love of a boy whom he had rescued, if not from a gutter, at any rate from a garret, and who was altogether insignificant save for his divine artistic gift, the fruits of which he was bound to sell at so reasonable a price to himself, and with, he supposed, the fancy of a girl who knows nothing of the world, for a handsome young face.

So in this dangerous state of little knowledge, he planned and invented as he talked about steamers and hotels, till even his companion was convinced that the utmost possible would be done for his convenience and comfort. Then, for he was now ready, Craddock took up Charles' sketch again.

"Certainly that young Lathom has a wonderful gift," he said, "and I congratulate myself on having obtained you so fine a copy of your Reynolds. He stayed with you, did he not, when the weather broke?"

Philip glanced at the clock: it was already half-past ten, but he did not mind having a word or two about Charles. Indeed, it is possible he would have initiated the subject.

"Yes, he was with us a week," he said, "though the invitation was not of my asking. He seemed a well-behaved young fellow."

Craddock caressed the side of his face before replying.

"I wish I could share your good opinion of him," he said. "Of course, when I recommended him to you for the work which he has certainly done very well, it never occurred to me that you would have him in the house like that. But I have no wish to enter into details, and since his connection with you is over, there is no reason why I should."

Philip got up.

"Indeed, I am glad to know that," he said, "because there certainly was considerable friendliness between him and Joyce, which I did not altogether like, though it was hard to prevent. Now I have a reason which my duty forbids me to disobey, for refusing to allow any resumption of their acquaintance—I am not sorry for that."

Craddock got up also.

"Then let us leave the subject," he said. "Now I know your bedtime is half-past ten, so pray do not be ceremonious with me, but allow me to sit here for a quarter of an hour more, while you go to bed. Listen at the storm! But by this day month, I hope we shall both be in that valley of Avalon basking in the warm sunshine of Nile-side. For the present it is goodnight and goodbye, for I have to go early to-morrow. I will write to Miss Joyce fully about our travelling arrangements."

Craddock lit another cigarette after his host was gone, and knowing he would not see him again in the morning, thought over what he had just said, to assure himself that he had managed to convey that indefinite sufficiency which he had in view. He thought that he had probably succeeded very well, for he had given his host an excuse, which he was clearly glad to make use of, for stopping any future intercourse between this young fellow and his own circle. And he had effected this without being positively libellous, for he had said no more than that he wished he could share Philip's good opinion of him. He felt that it was certainly time to prevent the ripening of this acquaintanceship, that Joyce had better have it conveyed to her, as assuredly she would, that she would not see the author of that sketch any more.

The sketch stood by him on the table, and once again he took it up, and found it even more admirable than he had thought. And even as he looked, the injury and wrong that he had done to its artist made him feel for the first time a curious dislike of him: he disliked him just because he had injured him. But this dislike did not extend to his pictures, and the thought that the portrait of his mother and two more canvases besides, would pass into his possession, gave him the keenest sort of satisfaction, since he augured for their author a fame and a future of no ordinary kind. What would that hand be capable of when its power was fully matured? Certainly it should not be for want of recognition that he should any longer remain unknown. He himself, though anonymously, had written the notice to the "Whitehall" regarding Charles' picture of his brother at Thorley Weir, and next week under his own signature would appear a column's notice of the same Exhibition, practically devoted to that one canvas. At any rate, that would have the effect of making the world in general turn their eyes to that which had evoked from him so apparently extravagant a eulogy, and he completely trusted the picture itself to convince them that no extravagance had been committed. People would be set talking, and in next year's Academy would be hung the portrait of Charles' mother. That would be sufficient.

He got up and lit his bedroom candle. It seemed to him that he had arranged Charles' future very satisfactorily. He would do the most that could be done for a young man with regard to his artistic career, and as regards his private affairs, he had made arrangements for them already in half a dozen sentences that had not been spoken amiss. But his new born dislike of him made him reconsider his resolve to pay him the hundred pounds which Mr. Ward had been so pleased to give for the copy of the Reynolds. After all, Charles had been promised only half that sum, and had been more than content to close with that bargain. The fact that Mr. Ward had paid more for it was a thing that lay outside questions that concerned him. Craddock had promised him fifty pounds for the copy, and Craddock would pay it.... But he did not definitely settle either on one sum or the other.

It was three days after this that Craddock's word of warning to Joyce's father bore fruit. She had come into his study that morning before lunch, and found him singularly well pleased at the proposed itinerary which Craddock had sent him that morning. Sleeping-berths had already been secured, they would not have to change trains at Paris, and the sleeping-car went, on arrival at Marseilles, straight through to the quay where their ship was berthed....

"And you came in to ask me something, Joyce," he said, when he had explained this.

"Yes, father. I have heard from Mr. Lathom, asking when he can come down to see his picture framed and in its place—I suppose any day will do, will it not? Shall I ask him to stay the night?"

Philip had been expecting this. He remembered a cordial invitation conveyed by his mother to the artist, to come back and see his handiwork when it was framed and in the room of the original picture. But it was a little uncomfortable to be obliged to give a reply so different to that which Joyce expected, and there was nothing in the world which he disliked so much as being uncomfortable. Bodily discomfort, of course, was the worst form of that imperfection, but mental discomfort was odious also.

"I think Mr. Lathom may take it for granted that his picture looks well, and pleases me," he said. "We have less than three weeks here, before we actually start for Egypt. There is an infinity of

things to do. You will be very busy without the extra burden of entertaining people."

Joyce did not at once assent to this, or even reply to it. All her secret knowledge seethed within her.

"He was asked to come to see it," she said.

A more definite statement was necessary. Philip had been glad enough of Craddock's information, but he did not find it quite easy to use it with Joyce's young eager face looking at him. Yet its eagerness gave him an added courage. It was too eager: in spite of the excellent reasonableness of her words, he felt the unreasonable wish behind them.

"By my mother," he said, "who does not regulate all my affairs. Frankly, my dear Joyce, I do not want Mr. Lathom in my house again. I do not hear a very good account of him. To copy a picture for me is one thing; to have him proposing himself even though asked, is quite another. You may take it that we have finished with Mr. Lathom."

Joyce's instinct and desire urged her.

"I don't see how I can write a letter to him on those lines," she said. "Am I to say that you don't wish to see him again? If that is so, father, you must write it yourself. I—I was very friendly with him when he was here. Why should I appear to cease to be so?"

Philip went into the rage of a weak man. He had not meant to argue the point with Joyce. He had, in his imagination, framed this interview on quite different lines. In his imagination it was enough for him to have said that Charles' proposed visit was inconvenient, and that Joyce would have written a note that should embody his wish. But while he delayed and fussed with the little appurtenances of his writing table, adjusting sealing-wax, and putting pens level, Joyce spoke again.

"He isn't quite like a bootmaker or a tailor," she said, "whom you can order down, and who will send in what you have commanded. He has been staying with us. I can't say to him that we have finished with him."

The weak rage burst out.

"That is what you are to say," he cried. "You will make it clear that he is not to come here again. You will show me your note when you have written it. Quite polite, of course, but it must be made clear that we have finished with him. He came to paint a portrait, and he has done so, and he has been paid, no doubt, for his trouble. That is all. We are going to Egypt within a week or two. His visit will be inconvenient. He may come after we have gone away, if he chooses, and look at his picture. He wants to see it: very well, he shall see it after the third week in November."

He beat with his feeble closed hand on his table.

"Do you understand?" he said. "You will tell him that he may come here when we are gone. Not before, and not after we get back. He can look at his picture every day for three months. You may tell him that if you choose. And you have no consideration for me, Joyce: you make me excited, and make me raise my voice, which, as you know quite well, always gives me a fit of coughing."

Joyce came back from the window, and sat down by her father at his table.

"If I am to write such a letter, father," she said, "I must know why I write it. You must tell me something which accounts for it."

She had her voice perfectly in control, but she could not control her colour. She felt that her face had become white, and though she detested herself for this palpable sign of emotion, she was powerless to prevent it.

"It is easy for me to account for it," said Philip, "though I should have hoped that my wish was enough."

"It isn't enough," said Joyce quietly. "I have treated him like a friend."

"You must treat him as a friend no longer, and as an acquaintance no longer. He is not a desirable friend for you nor an acquaintance. He is nothing to you: he painted a portrait. He begins and ends with that. He is not the sort of man I want to know, or want my daughter to know."

The weak rage subsided: but the calmer tone which followed was not less ineffectual.

"You must take my word for it, dear Joyce," he said. "You are young and inexperienced, and you must obey me, and not see any more of this young man. I have excellent authority for telling you that he is undesirable as friend or acquaintance. I am sorry for it: he seemed harmless enough and even well-bred!"

Joyce got up. The accumulated weight of the habit of filial obedience was heavy, but her heart was in declared rebellion. Nor did she believe what had been told her.

"Will you tell me who this excellent authority is?" she asked.

"No: you must take its excellence on trust from me."

Joyce turned to him. She spoke quite respectfully, but quite firmly.

"Then I can't write that letter," she said. "I am very sorry, but it is quite impossible."

"And do you intend also to disobey me with regard to neither seeing nor communicating with Mr. Lathom again?"

Joyce hesitated.

"No, I intend to obey you," she said. "At least—at least I promise to tell you if I ever intend to do otherwise."

For the first time it struck him that he was dealing with a force greater than any that was at his command. Hitherto, Joyce had never put herself into open opposition to him, and he had had no experience of the power which her habitual serenity held within it.

"You are vastly obliging," he said. "I had no idea I had so obedient a daughter."

"I am sorry, father," she said. "But you have been asking me to do things I can't do."

"Things you won't do," said he. "You have made me feel very unwell with your obstinacy."

"I am sorry for that, too," she said.

CHAPTER VI.

The autumn session, combined with a singularly evil season as regards pheasants, had caused London to become very full again during November with the class that most needs and happily can best afford to pay for amusement, and theatres were enjoying a period of unprecedented prosperity. Night after night the queue outside the theatre where "Easter Eggs" was being performed had the length attained usually only by gala performances and after a month's run Craddock had successfully accomplished the hazardous experiment of transplanting it to a much larger theatre, which, by chance, happened to be tenantless. His luck still burned as a star of the first magnitude, and he had without difficulty subtlet the scene of its initial triumph, and started a couple of provincial companies on a prosperous progress. Money poured in, and with a generosity that surprised himself he presented the author (though there was no kind of claim on him) with a further munificent sum of two hundred pounds. But Armstrong's continued ingratitude though it pained him, did not surprise him nearly so much as his own generosity. He knew exactly how the young man felt.

It was but a few days before he was to start on the Egyptian expedition, when Armstrong was dining with him in his flat in Berkeley Square, intending to read to him after they had dined, the first act of "The Lane without a Turning," which, with somewhat cynical enjoyment, he was remodelling in order to suit the taste of the great Ass, as he called the patrons of the drama, though Craddock had urged and entreated him not to attempt this transformation. However thoroughly it was transformed he argued that the great Ass would detect that below lay the original play of which it had so strongly disapproved, would feel that it was being laughed at, and would, as it always was quick to do, resent ridicule. He put forward this view with much clearness as they dined.

"You have had the good fortune that comes perhaps to one per cent. of those who try to write plays," he said. "You have scored a great and signal success, and I beseech you not to imperil your reputation and prestige by so risky an experiment. I don't doubt your adroitness in remodelling and even reprincipling—if I may coin a word——"

Frank had only just filled his wine-glass. He emptied it at a gulp.

"Not exactly reprincipling," he said, "it's more turning it upside down. But I think your advice is rather premature, do you know, considering you have not at present the slightest idea what this remodelled play will be like. Had you not better wait till I read you some of it?"

"I don't think it matters what it is like," said Craddock, "because there will still be 'The Lane without a Turning' at the bottom of it. It might be Macbeth and Hamlet rolled into one——"

"That remarkable combination would certainly have a very short run," remarked Frank. "You were saying?"

"I was saying that the public, and the critics, will know that at the base of your play lies the play they so unmistakably rejected."

"There was one critic who thought it promising," said Frank. "And he is reaping a very tidy little harvest for his perspicacity."

"You are girding at everything I say this evening, my dear fellow," said Craddock placidly.

Frank looked at him with scarcely repressed malevolence.

"I think the sight of this opulent room and this good dinner and delicious wine makes me feel vicious," he said. "I can't help remembering that it is I who have really paid for all I am eating and drinking a hundred times over. And yet it is you who ask me to dinner."

"I am sorry if I burden you with my hospitality," said Craddock. "And as a matter of fact, it was you who asked yourself."

Frank Armstrong laughed.

"Quite true," he said, "and I will ask myself to have another glass of port. But really I think the situation justifies a little wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Craddock was slightly afraid of this very uncompromising young man. He liked to feel himself the master and the beneficent patron of his protégés, and it was a very imperfect sense of mastery

that he enjoyed when he was with this particular beneficiary. He had tried cajolery and flattering him with the most insignificant results, and he determined to adopt more heroic methods.

"As to the gnashing of teeth," he observed, "there certainly was less gnashing of teeth on your part before I put on this play for you, for the simple reason that you often had to go without meals. But I am bound to say you didn't wail."

Frank laughed again.

"That's not bad," he said. "But I repeat that it is maddening to think of you earning in a week over my labour, as much as I earned altogether. Of course you had the capital; one can't expect labour and capital to fall into each other's arms."

"I had much more than the capital," said Craddock. "I had the sense to see that star-actors would not take, or if they did take, would ruin your works. You had not the sense to see that, if you will pardon my saying so."

"True. I like you better when you answer me back, and I'm not denying your shrewdness—God forbid when I have been the victim of it. I've been thinking, let me tell you, how I can get out of your clutches, but really I don't see my way. You may take it I suppose that you're safe. Now about this play. I don't see to begin with why it matters to you what I write. You needn't exercise your option over it, unless you please. In that case I shall get it done on my own account."

"Ah, but it does matter to me," said Craddock. "If you produce a couple of plays that fail, you may consider your present success as wiped out. You can't tamper with a reputation, and the bigger it is—yours at this moment is very big indeed—the more it is vulnerable. It is for your sake no less than mine that I am so strong about this."

"Surely for my sake a little less than yours?" suggested Frank.

"If you will have it so. And for your sake a little less than mine I advise you not to produce plays too quickly. The public are very fickle: if you flood the theatres with the dramas of Frank Armstrong they will soon laugh at you."

"I disagree with that policy altogether," said Frank. "Whatever happens they will get tired of you in five or six years. So for five or six years I propose to produce as many plays as I possibly can. I find I've got lots more twaddle-sketches and things half-finished, and scenarios that were invariably returned to me. But they shall be returned to me no longer. Actors and managers are tumbling over each other to get hold of my work. I like seeing them tumble. By the way, there is a point in our agreement I should like to discuss. Akroyd came to me to-day—good Lord, think of Akroyd coming to me, when a few months ago he wouldn't even let me come to him—he came to me with his terrible smile and his amazing clothes and offered me a thousand pounds in advance on account of royalties for a play. He wants to see and approve the bare scenario. Now supposing I accept, and you choose to exercise your option on it, do you get that?"

"Naturally. I have acquired all rights in such a play. I shall also try to make Akroyd give me a little more than that."

"Hell!" said Frank succinctly.

He poured himself out another glass of port as he spoke, and shaking the drop off the lip of the decanter broke his glass and flooded the tablecloth. His action was on the border-land between purpose and accident, and he certainly was not sorry as he looked at the swiftly-spreading stain.

"My port, my tablecloth," he observed.

"And your manners," said Craddock drily.

"Yes, I deserved that. But I didn't really do it on purpose, so, as it was an accident, I'll say I am sorry. No, no more, thanks. But I feel in a better temper you may be pleased to hear. There's nothing so soothing as smashing something, if one doesn't value it oneself. I spent an hour this afternoon at one of the side-shows in the Exhibition, banging wooden balls, seven for sixpence, at a lot of crockery on a shelf. What an ironical affair the world is! When I had hardly enough money to get dinner for myself, nobody ever asked me to dinner, and now that there is no longer any difficulty in paying for my own dinner, everybody wants me to dine at his or her—chiefly her—house. People I have never seen who live in squares, write to me, giving me the choice of a couple of nights! They ask other people I have never seen to meet me. They roar with laughter, whatever I say, or if it obviously isn't funny, they look pensive and say 'How true!' What a great Ass it is!"

"Ah, make the most of that," said Craddock. "A dozen people talking about you will do more for you than a dozen newspapers shouting about you."

"Probably, but I rather like the newspaper shouting. It's so damned funny to think of a lot of grinning compositors ruining their eyesight to set up columns about me. I read your article in the 'Whitehall,' by the way; you didn't spare the adjectives did you? They send interviewers to me, too, with cameras and flash-lights, who fill my room with stinking-smoke, and ask me to tell them about my early days. Hot stuff, some of it. They are nuts on the story of my father throwing the knife at me."

"Did you tell them that?" asked Craddock, feeling rather bruised.

"Certainly. Why should I not? He came to see me this morning himself, rather tipsy, and I told him to go away and come back when he was sober, and I would give him half-a-crown to get drunk on again. There's a commandment, isn't there, about honouring your father. I should like

to see a fellow trying to honour mine. It's out of my power."

Frank lit a cigar, and leaned forward with his elbows on the table.

"Success hasn't made me a snivelling sentimentalist," he observed. "Now that I'm on the road to make money—or I shall be when I've got out of your hands—I don't instantly think the world is a garden full of ripe apricots and angels. It's a hard cruel world, same as it always was, and the strong tread on the weak and the clever suck the foolish, as a spider pulls off the leg of a fly and sucks it. I've often watched that. I've been foolish, too, at least I've been hungry, and in consequence you are sucking me. But why should I go slobbering over and blessing my father, who made life hell to me? Or why should I say it's a kind, nice world just because I myself am not cold or hungry any longer? And I'm not a bit sorry for the cold and hungry any more than I was sorry for myself when I was among them. I hated being cold and hungry, it is true, but nobody cared, and I learned to expect that nobody should care unless he could get something out of me, as you have done. All your fine rich people were there while I was starving, and nobody asked me to dinner or treated me to dozens of wooden balls at the exhibition. Now I've shown that I can amuse them for an hour or two after dinner, they think I'm no end of a fine fellow. But I've not changed. I always believed in myself, even when I was hungriest, and not being hungry doesn't make me believe in anything else. No, no more wine, thanks. I'm not going to take after my father. By the way, I met a dear little female Methuselah last night, name of Lady Crowborough, who told me she knew you. I congratulated her, of course."

"Did you—did you mention your connection with me?" asked Craddock, with some little anxiety not wholly concealed.

"You wouldn't have liked that, would you? But you can make your mind easy. I didn't and I don't suppose I shall, I wouldn't vex you for the world."

"That is not so good a reason as I should expect from you."

"No? Try this one then. You made a fool of me, you see, you outwitted me. I don't want people to know that for my sake far more than yours. The rôle of the brilliant successful dramatist is more to my mind than the rôle of your dupe."

"These are offensive expressions," said Craddock.

"Certainly. But why should you care? No doubt other people have used them before to you. By the way again, there was another fellow there last night who knew you, under Lady Crowborough's slightly moulting wing. Lathom: that was his name. I congratulated him also. There was something rather taking about him: a weird sort of guilelessness and gratitude. He's coming to the play with me sometime next week. And now if you want to hear the first act of the 'Lane without a Turning,' we had better begin? I'm going to Mrs. Fortescue's party later on. Who is Mrs. Fortescue?"

"The prettiest bore in London, which is saying a good deal, both as regards looks and as regards *ennui*. But she is so convinced she is only twenty-eight, she is worth your study as showing the lengths to which credulity can go. By all means let me hear your first act."

Armstrong got up.

"I want you to tell me when you have heard it," he said, "and when I have told you how the second and third acts will go, whether you exercise your option or not. You are going to Egypt in a few days, you tell me, and I don't want this hung up till you get back."

"I have no doubt I shall be able to tell you," said Craddock.

In spite of this assurance, Craddock found himself an hour afterwards, in a state of bewildered indecision. The finished first act, together with a very full scenario of the other two, gave him, as he was well aware, sufficient data for his conclusions, but he was strangely embarrassed at the recital of the brilliant and farcical medley, which, as the author had said, turned the original play upside down, parodied it, and winged it with iridescent absurdity. He knew well the unaccountableness of the public, well, too, he knew the value of a reputation such as "Easter Eggs" had brought its author, and it seemed to him a frantic imperilment of that reputation to flaunt this rainbowed farce in the face of the public. Armstrong had acquired the name of an observant and kindly humorist, here he laughed at (not with) the gentle lives of ungifted people. Again, in the original play, he involved his puppets in a net of inextricable tragedy: here, as by a conjuring-trick he let them escape, with shouts of ridicule at the suppose Destiny that had entangled them. The play might easily be a failure the more stupendous because of the stupendous success of "Easter Eggs": on the other hand there was the chance, the bare chance, that its inimitable and mocking wit might be caught by the rather stolid Ass.... But he had to decide: he knew quite well that he had sufficient data for his decision, and he did not in the least desire merely to annoy Armstrong by a plea for further opportunity of consideration. But he most sincerely wished that the play had never been written. And that wish gave him an idea that for the moment seemed brilliant. He was harvesting money in sheaves, he could well afford it....

"I will exercise my option," he said at length, "and then I will destroy the play. For your convenience, my dear fellow, you needn't even put on paper the last two acts. You can take your cheque away with you to-night."

Frank Armstrong considered this munificent proposal for a moment in silence, looking very ugly.

"You didn't purchase the right to destroy my work," he said.

"I purchased the right to possess it."

For a minute more Armstrong frowned and glowered. Then suddenly his face cleared, and he gave an astonishing shout of laughter.

"All right," he said, "Draw the cheque, and here are my manuscript and notes, which you are going to destroy. To-morrow I shall begin a new play exactly like it. How's that? Gosh, what an ass I am! I ought to have got your cheque first and cashed it before I told you. But you gave yourself away so terribly by telling me you would purchase and destroy it that I was off my guard. But now——"

Once again the sense of imperfect mastery struck Craddock. There was this difference about it now that it forced itself rather as being a sense of mastery on the other side. He was thrown back on the original debate in his mind. Doubt of success prevailed.

"I take no option," he said curtly.

Frank got up.

"Thank God," he said. "Good night."

Craddock sat quiescent for a few minutes after Armstrong had left him, feeling rather battered and bruised, and yet conscious of having passed a stimulating evening. And he did not wonder that that section of London who spend most of their time and money in procuring tonic entertainments that shall keep their pulses racing, should pursue this flaring young man with eager hospitalities. He was liable, it is true, to behave like a young bull-calf: he might, and often did, lower his head, and, fixing a steady and vicious eye on you, charge you with the most masculine vigour, but it was quite impossible to be dull when he was there. There was a strength, a driving force about him that raised the level of vitality at social gatherings, and though it was a little disconcerting to have him suddenly attack you, he might equally well attack somebody else, which was excessively amusing. Moreover many women found a personal attack exciting and inspiring. To be tossed and tumbled conversationally did not do one any harm, and so virile and brutal an onslaught as his had something really fascinating about it. To be sure, he had no manners, but yet he had not bad manners. He would not plan an impertinence, he only ran at a red rag, of which, apparently, the world held many for him. If he was bored, it is true that he yawned, but he didn't yawn in order to impress upon you your boring qualities, he only expressed naturally and unaffectedly, his own lack of interest in what you were saying. To be sure, also, he was ugly and clumsy, but when there were so many pretty little men about, who talked in the softest of voices and manicured their nails, a great rough young male like this, who said he hated dancing, and asked leave to smoke his pipe instead of a cigarette, brought a sense of reality into the room with him. He was not rough and uncouth on purpose: merely that big clever brain of his was too busy to bother about the frills and finishings of life. Scandal and tittle-tattle had no interest for him, but when he told you about his own early years, or even when with inimitable mimicry he showed you how Craddock felt for a whisker, and looked at his plump little hands, he was immensely entertaining. Very likely he would soon become tiresome and familiar, but it would be time to drop him then.

Craddock was not in the least surprised at this lionizing of young Armstrong. Not only had he written the play which was undeniably the bull's-eye of the year, which in itself was sufficient, but, unlike most writers and artists, the strength of whose personality is absorbed into their achievements, he had this dominating personal force. Craddock knew well the mercantile value of the social excitement over the author of "Easter Eggs" (as he had said to Armstrong a dozen people talking was worth the shouting of two dozen journals), and while it lasted there was no question that stalls and dress-circles would overflow for his plays. Apparently, too, they had the no less valuable attraction for pit and gallery: there was a sincerity about his work that appealed to those who were not warmed by the mere crackle of epigrams and neat conversation. But while he welcomed Armstrong's appearance as a lion as a remunerative asset at the box-office, he was not so sure that he entirely approved of a possible intimacy between his new artist and his new playwright. He could not have definitely accounted for his distaste, but it was there, and though he was in the rapids that preceded his departure for Egypt, he found time next morning to go round to Charles' studio, ostensibly to see the finished portrait of his mother, but with a mind alert to sound a warning note as to undesirable companionship.

Charles the Joyful, as Craddock had christened him, received his visitor with arms open but with palette and brush and mahl-stick. The confidence which he had so easily won from the boy, at that first meeting by their weir, burned with a more serene brightness than ever, and his gratitude towards his patron was renewed morning by morning when he came into the comfortable well-appointed studio which had been given him.

"Oh, I say, Mr. Craddock," he exclaimed, "but it is jolly of you to come round to see me. Do say that you'll stop for lunch. It will be quite beastly by the way, but I promised to cook lunch for Lady Crowborough who is coming. But there are things in tins to eke out with."

Indeed this was a very different sort of protégé from him who had spilt the port last night, so much easier to deal with, so much more conscious of benefits. Gratitude and affection were so infinitely more becoming than the envious mistrust that Frank habitually exhibited. And how handsome the boy was, with his fresh colour, his kindled eyes, and unconscious grace of pose as he stood there palette on thumb! How fit to draw after him, like a magnet, the glances of some tall English girl. And at the thought, and at the remembrance of the injury he had done Charles, Craddock felt his dislike of him stir and hiss once more.

"I can't do that my dear Charles," he said, "as I have only a quarter of an hour to spare. Besides I am far too prudent to think of incurring Lady Crowborough's enmity by spoiling her tête-à-tête with you. But on this grey morning I felt it would do me good to see your Serene Joyfulness, and also the presentment of your Joyfulness' Mother which you tell me is finished."

Charles looked deprecating.

"I'm rather frightened," he said. "You see, I've changed it a lot since you saw it. I took out the whole of the head and painted it quite fresh and quite differently."

Craddock frowned ... it was as if Armstrong had interpolated an act in "Easter Eggs" without permission.

"My dear fellow, I don't think you had any business to do that without consulting me," he said. "I had said I would buy the picture: you knew too that I immensely admired it as it was. Where is it? Let me see it."

Charles seemed to resent this somewhat hectoring and school-master-like tone. Below the Serene Joyfulness there was something rather more firm and masculine than Craddock had expected.

"Oh, I can't concede to you the right to tell me how I shall paint," he said. "Just after you saw the picture the other day I suddenly saw I could do better than that. I must do my best. And as a matter of fact I don't think you will mind when you see it. Here it is, anyhow."

He wheeled the picture which was on an easel, face to the wall into position, and stood rather stiff and high-headed.

"I shall be sorry if you don't like it," he said, "but I can't help it."

Somehow it struck Craddock that Charles had grown tremendously in self-reliance and manliness since he had first seen that shy incredulous boy at the weir. He was disposed to take credit to himself for this: these weeks of happy expansion, of freedom from the dragging sense of dependence had made a man of him. And then still blameful he looked at the picture. Long he looked at it and silently, and quickly in his mind the conviction grew that he must climb quite completely down from his hectoring attitude. But, after all, it was not so difficult: there were compensations, for the lower he had to go, the higher the picture soared, soared like some sunlit ship-in-air.

"You were perfectly right," he said at length. "It was the rashest presumption in me to suppose that I knew better than you. That will make you famous. I was an utter fool, my dear Charles, to have imagined that you could have spoiled it."

"Oh, that's all right," said Charles, tall amid his certainties.

Again Craddock looked long at it.

"Is it finished now?" he asked humbly.

"I think so. It seems to be what I see, and a picture is finished when that's the case. I daresay I shall see more sometime: then I shall do another."

Craddock felt no call on his superlatives.

"I must say I shall be seriously anxious if I thought you were going to scrape it out again," he said, "though this time I shouldn't dream of interfering. Now what other work have you got on hand? I am off to Egypt in two days, and I should like to know I leave you busy. Did Mrs. Fortescue come to your studio? I recommended her to."

"I know: it was awfully good of you, and I am going to paint her. You told me to charge two hundred guineas, which seemed a tremendous lot."

"Not in the least. You won't remain at that figure long."

Charles made a face of comic distaste.

"I—I don't quite know how to paint her," he said. "I can't make her as young as it is clear she thinks herself, and I can't make her such a bore as I think her."

"How could your portrait show you think her a bore?" asked Craddock.

"How it shall not is my difficulty. I must try not to get a weary brush. Then Lady Crowborough says she will sit to me when she comes back in the spring. I shall love doing that. By the way—"

Charles hesitated a moment.

"You've been so extraordinarily kind to me," he said, "that perhaps you don't mind my consulting you. She told me to propose myself to go down and see my copy of the Reynolds picture when it was framed and in its place, and for the last month I've been ready to do so any day. But Mr. Wroughton wrote me rather a queer letter. He suggested that I should go down after they left for Egypt. It read to me rather as if he didn't want to see me. And I was so friendly with them all. What can have happened?"

Craddock assumed his most reassuring manner.

"Happened?" he said. "What on earth could have happened? You know our respected host down at the Mill House. I assure you when I was there three weeks ago for one night he could think about nothing but his underclothing for Egypt, and the price of pith-helmets. He had already, I believe, begun to pack his steamer-trunks and his medicine-chests. Do not give it another thought."

Charles gave a sigh of relief.

"I'm so glad you think that is the reason," he said. "All the same I should have liked to go down and say goodbye to—to them."

"To her, don't you mean?" said Craddock.

Charles flushed and laughed.

"Well, yes, to her," he said. "Why not?"

"Why not indeed? Every sensible young man likes to say some goodbye to a charming girl, if he can do no more than that. My dear fellow, if only I was your age, I should take a leaping heart to Egypt. And now that we've pricked that little troublesome bubble, tell me a little more about yourself and your life. I meant to have seen much more of you this last week or two, but I have been distractedly busy, and have seen no one but people on business. Apart from your work, have you been going about much?"

"Hardly at all. I don't know so many people you see. I dined with Lady Crowborough, though, a couple of nights ago, and she took me to a big party. Oh, and I met there such a strange queer fellow, name of Armstrong, who said he knew you. He wrote "Easter Eggs": such a ripping play. Have you seen it? He is going to take me to it next week."

Craddock puffed the smoked-out end of his cigarette from its amber tube into the grate.

"Yes, I know him," he said. "I should not have thought there was much in common between you."

"I'm not sure. I should like to find out. And, heavens, how I should like to paint his portrait. Where's the charcoal?"

Charles seized a stick and spread a loose sheet of paper on the table.

"Eye like that," he said, "with the eyebrow like a pent-house over it. Face, did you ever see such a jaw, square like that and hungry. That's the sort of face it pays to paint. There's something to catch hold of. And his ears are pointed, like a Satyr's. I think I must ask him to sit to me. I'll give him the portrait if he will."

Craddock took up this six-line sketch.

"Yes, very like, indeed," he said, "and a terrible face. And now I must go. But I wonder if you will resent a word of advice."

"Try," said Charles encouragingly.

"Well, I will. Now, my dear Charles, you are a young man just beginning your career, and it is immensely important you should get among the right people. The Latin quarter in Paris is one thing: Bohemianism in London is quite another. For the next forty years your work will be to paint these charming mothers and daughters of England. They have got to come and sit to you in your studio. They won't if they find that it savours of the Bohemian. You can't be too careful as to your friends, for the strongest and most self-sufficient people take their colour from their friends: they can't help it."

He laid his plump white hand, which he had been observing, on Charles' shoulder.

"You must pardon me," he said, "but I have got to the time of life when an unmarried man wishes he had a son growing up. But I have none,—I have to expend my unfruitful potentiality of parentage elsewhere. If you were my son, I should choose your friends for you so carefully."

There was something pathetic and unexpected about this, which could not but touch Charles. But somehow he felt as if he ought to have been more touched....

"*À propos* of Armstrong?" he suggested.

"*À propos* of intimacy with Mr. Armstrong in general," said Craddock, feeling somehow that he had missed fire, and that it was as well to get behind a hedge again.

Charles nodded. Then suddenly he felt his own lack of responsiveness: he felt also, though without touch of priggishness, that here was a man who had been wonderfully good to him, and who felt the burden of the years that were not lightened by the tie of fatherhood with youth. It struck him suddenly, vaguely but convincingly.

"You have been as kind as a father to me," he said quickly. "I hope I don't pay you with a son's proverbial ingratitude. You have been like a father to me—I—I've often wanted to tell you that."

He looked up a moment at Craddock, and then seized with a fit of misgiving at his blurted outspokenness, shied away from the subject, like some young colt.

"But I should like to paint Armstrong's portrait," he said. "I promise you that you would not think I had wasted my time."

Craddock appeared to accept this sudden switching off of sentiment.

"I will leave you free from any option of mine regarding it," he said. "To have it on the wall

opposite me would certainly cause me indigestion, if it was as like as your charcoal sketch. The truth is he has not behaved very nicely to me. I tried to befriend him, as I have tried to befriend you, but with less success in amicable relationship. It is a mere nothing, but I felt I might do worse than give you a word of warning. It is of course for your private ear alone. Goodbye, my dear Charles. I shall let you know when I get back from the land of bondage. And accept my long experience to make your mind easy over the matter of going down to see your admirable copy of that Reynolds picture. I should not for instance, confide in Lady Crowborough. God bless you!"

Craddock took the unusual step of walking back to Berkeley Square after he had left Charles, and as he pursued his portly way up the Brompton Road, he thought rather intently over what he had said, and again, as on the evening when he had let drop a few lying words to Philip Wroughton, he felt he had not spoken amiss. He could not possibly prevent an acquaintance between his two protégés, nor could he certainly prevent it ripening into an intimacy, but he felt he had spoken well when he hinted that Armstrong had not behaved very nicely to him. As a rule, he did not much believe in the stability of such an emotion as gratitude, but he believed very strongly in the child-like simplicity of Charles. In this his conclusions were firmly founded, for in the course of his life he had never come across, as a matter of fact, so guileless and unsuspecting a nature. He almost regretted the necessity of deceiving him, for the feat was so inconspicuous a one. Charles was a child, a child with a divine gift, of which he himself was in the position to take secure advantage. After all nurses and kind mothers habitually deceived children: they told them that if they squinted and the wind changed, their squint would be permanent: they told them that many poor beggars would be glad of the food they rejected, in order to induce them to swallow it, and thus, incidentally, to extinguish altogether the outside chance of a poor beggar getting it: they told them that God would be angry with them if they disobeyed orders and got their feet wet.... Charles was just a child. Though certainly he had grown a good deal lately. But his soul was a child's.

It was not until he had walked as far as Hyde Park corner that he knew he was waging a war instead of merely conducting a child's education. He was at war, he with his obese person and half-century of years, with the generation that had sprung up after him, and was now realising the zenith of its youthful vigour. Already it trod on his heels, already he seemed to hear in his ears its intolerant laughter at his portly progress, and his first acute attack of middle-age stabbed him like the lumbago from which he occasionally suffered. It seemed to him a devilish complaint, not to be acquiesced in, but to be ostentatiously disregarded and denied. Even since last June, when he had first felt the charm and the need of girlhood, he had suspected this foe, and the fact that Charles admitted the attraction which was his magnet also, stiffened his resistance. He hated the young generation, chiefly because his own youth had been a bloodless affair, but he did not feel himself old, except when he met the guileless eyes of Charles, or the vindictive glance of young Armstrong. Both of these, in their widely different fashions, illumined the truth, and thus for them, these young and vigorous males, he cherished an enmity that rivalled Armstrong's. But he was not shelved and done with yet. As far as the attainment of love went, he entered the lists against Charles, as far as hard business capacity went, he was willing to meet Armstrong. But he had suffered an initial defeat on either hand. On the one side Armstrong had taken this remodelled play into his own control, on the other—this was more subtle—Charles had been able to paint that rough sketch of Joyce among the forget-me-nots. Yet he had weapons against these attacks. He could and would write feebly appreciative notices of the play, more damning than any slash of onslaught, he could and would go southwards with Joyce, and her approving father, the day after to-morrow.

And then with a spasm of satisfaction he thought of Lady Crowborough. With one if not both feet in the grave, she was kissing her hands as vigorously and contentedly as ever. Her conviction of perennial youth overrode the disabilities of years: age was a mere question of conviction: he had only to convince himself. Even at this moment she, who had attained middle-age before he was born, was lurching with a boy whose father he himself might be, and tasting all the delights of flirtation and unspeakable decoctions over a gas-stove.... "The new flirt...." He could hear her say it with unctuous serenity. And the "new flirt" was that child Charles, he who was so much younger than anyone Craddock had ever known. Of course Lady Crowborough was a freak, but if a woman did not feel old at ninety (according to her own account) what excuse was there for a man feeling middle-aged at fifty, or a little less? He determined to have no lunch whatever, but have a Turkish bath and a swim at the Bath Club instead.

Just as Craddock might have made a certain sinister suggestion to Philip Wroughton about Charles, had he known that after she left them she read and re-read two common-place little letters and regarded something that had once been a straw hat, so to-day he might not have foregone lunch and sat in the agreeable tropics underneath the Bath Club (as a matter of fact these processes made him so hungry that he indulged in a sandwich or two afterwards) in the heroic hue-and-cry after his vanished youth, if he had been aware of Charles' immediate occupation after he had left him. There was another canvas, a big one, leaning with averted face in the corner of his studio. It represented a girl kneeling among forget-me-nots at the edge of a stream. Behind was a spouting-weir. He had half a dozen sketches of the weir to help him, some very carefully finished, which he had made in preparation for that picture of the bathing-boy, and

he had so many sketches, more vivid than these, more brilliantly lit by the steadfast lamp within his brain, to help him.

But he had felt he could not show this to Craddock: he did not know if he could ever show it to anybody, it was his own, or hers, if ever she cared for it or for him.... But it was not Craddock's. Eagerly now he pulled it into the light.

It mattered not what he worked on, in this picture, so long as he worked at it. The figure that knelt there, dressed in stained blue, had suffused the whole, so that the grey camp sheltering below the weir, the loosestrife and meadow-sweet, the rope of hurrying water, woven by the force of the stream, were all part of her. Unsuspicious and trustful by nature, relying on Craddock's experience and knowledge of the world, on his brief assurance that there was nothing below the curt note which had given Charles leave to see his Reynolds' copy after the family had gone, he wiped off his mind, almost without an effort, the vague doubts that had for the last week or two tarnished and dimmed it. Craddock, who had been so uniformly kind to him, who had almost lapsed into parental sentiment to-day, had not thought his doubts worth a moment's debate. Besides, what could have occurred to change the friendliness of the family into this cold acidity? What, also, could be more reasonable than the explanation which Craddock threw off, over his shoulder, so to speak, of Philip's amazing solicitude for the complete provision of his own comfort.

"Blue! Blue! What a world of blues! Sky, dress, eyes, forget-me-nots, reflection of sky, reflection of dress, and eyes that looked straight into his." These reflections came not into his picture ... he caught and kept these....

Craddock's prophecy (the wish perhaps being father to it) that the two young men whom he had benefited would not find much in common, seemed at their first meeting to be likely of fulfilment. They met at the theatre, and Charles' enthusiastic appreciation of the piece, at the second time of witnessing it, seemed to rouse Armstrong's contempt.

"I wish you had told me you had seen it before," he said as they lounged and smoked between the acts, "and we could have gone to something else."

"But there's nothing else I should have liked so much," said Charles eagerly. "I think that scene between Violet and the curate is simply priceless. Do tell me about it? Did you know people like that?"

Frank beckoned to the man in the box-office.

"Just show me the returns for this week," he said. Then he answered Charles.

"Yes: I used to think they were like that," he said. "I expect they were far harder and meaner and fouler really. People can't be as gutless as I've made them all out to be."

"Oh, but they're not gutless, do you think? They are kind and jolly, and slightly ridiculous.... Isn't that it? Like most people in fact, but you've seen the funny side of them."

The man from the box-office had returned, and handed Armstrong a strip of paper.

"Fuller than ever, Mr. Armstrong, you see," he said with a sort of proprietorship, like the head-waiter at a restaurant when guests find a dish to their taste. "And advance bookings go well on to the other side of Christmas."

Unaccountably, the dish was not to Armstrong's taste.

"Blasted fools people are," he remarked, and nodded curtly to the man.

"I'm one of them, you know," said Charles.

"Yes: I forgot that. But don't you ever despise your pictures—anyhow distrust them—just because they are popular?"

Charles laughed.

"I haven't yet been in the position to find out what effect popularity would have on my own estimate," he said. "Oh, but wait a minute—I went to a gallery the other day, where there was a picture of mine, and there happened to be some people round it, so I went among them and listened to what they said. They were rather complimentary, and—and I think I liked them for it. Anyhow it didn't affect my own estimate."

Frank Armstrong glared at the well-dressed, well-fed loungers in the entrance.

"Somehow, I think fellows like these must be all wrong in their taste," he said.

"Then would you like unpopularity? Would you be better pleased if the theatre was empty, and there was no advance booking?"

Frank Armstrong grinned.

"No: I should curse like mad," he said. "It happened to me once, and I had no use for it."

Then his surliness broke down.

"I don't mind telling you," he said. "The fact is that I sold my play inside out from Iceland to Peru and Madagascar, and I don't get a penny more or less whether it runs to Doomsday or only New Year's Day. I feel all these people are defrauding me."

"Oh, what a pity!" said Charles. "I am sorry. But they'll come flocking to your next play."

The thought that there were three more plays of his to be pounced by Craddock sealed Armstrong's good humour up again. It had put in a very inconspicuous appearance, and now popped back like a lizard into its hole. He shrugged his shoulders.

"There's the bell," he said, "if you want to hear the third act."

"Don't want to miss a word," said Charles cordially.

Through the first half of the act Armstrong so yawned and fidgeted in the stall next him, that about the middle of it Charles felt that good manners prompted him to suggest that they should not remain till the end. Yet another way round, good manners were horrified at such a course. It would appear that the play bored him.... But he decided to risk it, Armstrong was so obviously tired of it all.

"Shall we go?" he suggested.

Armstrong slid from his seat into the gangway.

"I thought the third act would be too much for you," he observed.

They went quickly and quietly up through the swing-doors, and Charles, rather troubled, laid a hand on the other's arm.

"It wasn't that a bit, indeed it wasn't," he said. "But you were yawning and grunting, you know—I thought you wanted to get out. I—I was enjoying it."

Armstrong knew he was behaving rudely to his guest, but to-night the thronged theatre, also, in part, the buoyancy of the Serene Joyfulness, had got on his nerves.

"Then go back and enjoy the rest of it," he said.

Charles' good humour was quite unimpaired: it was as fresh as paint.

"I think I will," he said. "Thanks awfully for bringing me. I'm enjoying myself tremendously. Good night."

Somehow for the moment that annoyed Armstrong even more, and there is no doubt that he would have found a pungently-flavoured reply. But there was no reply possible: on the word Charles had turned and gone back through the swing-doors once more. Then it dawned on Armstrong that his annoyance with Charles was really annoyance with himself at his own ill-mannered behaviour. For half-a-minute he hesitated, more than half disposed to follow him, to say a whispered word of regret if necessary.... Then again the balance wavered, and he went out into the street. People with such infernally good tempers as his new acquaintance, he thought, should not be allowed at large. They did not fit in with his own ideas of the world, where everyone sought and grasped and snarled, unless he had some specific reason for making himself pleasant.

He looked aimlessly up and down Shaftesbury Avenue as he stood on the steps of the theatre, uncertain what to do with himself. There was a party he was bidden to, but he felt no inclination to stand and fire off the cheap neat gibes that he knew were considered his contribution to such gatherings, his payment for a supper and a cigarette, nor, as on some nights, did the illuminated street with the flaring sky-signs up above, and the flaring gaiety of the pavements below, allure him in the least. Sometimes he wandered up and down Piccadilly for an hour at a time in absorbed yet incurious observation of it all. It all bore out his theory of life: the spoiler and the spoiled, the barterer and bartered, everybody wanted something, everybody had to pay for it. But to-night the street seemed a mere galaxy of coloured shifting glass.... Should he then go home, and work for an hour on his remodelled "Lane without a Turning"?... He thought with a little spasm of inward amusement at the title that had occurred to him to-day, namely, "It's a Long Lane that has Five Turnings." They were all there in the play, five distinct turnings, parodies of passion; five separate times would the stalls make a fixed face so as not to show they were shocked, five separate times would they be utterly fooled and have fixed their faces for nothing. Those who happened to remember the original play—there would not be many of them—would laugh a little first because they would guess what was *not* going to happen: those who had never seen that sombre and serious work would merely find here the most entrancingly unexpected farcical situations developing on legitimate lines out of tragical data.

Strolling, he found himself underneath the brilliantly lit doors of Mr. Akroyd's theatre, where within at this hour, as Armstrong well knew, Mr. Fred Akroyd was being nobler than anybody who had ever yet worn a frock-coat and patent-leather shoes, with a pith helmet to indicate India. The third act would only just have begun: Akroyd was even now probably beginning to dawn like a harvest moon on the blackness of night and the plentiful crop. The moon would reach the zenith in about twenty minutes. Then it died in the garden of the Viceroy at Simla (blue incredible Himalayas behind) ... and, if he sent his card in, he felt sure that Mr. Akroyd (after death in the garden) would be charmed to talk to him for ten minutes. It would be well to make some sort of contract without delay in case Craddock changed his mind about an option on this bewildering topsy-turvy of a Lane. For the moment he even felt grateful to Craddock for the hint he had given him as to the possibility of getting a larger advance on royalties out of Akroyd than the thousand pounds which that eminent actor-manager had offered. He would certainly act on the suggestion.

Akroyd was just expiring when he arrived, and after waiting five minutes he was shown into his dressing-room. The actor was still a little prostrate and perspiring profusely, with his efforts, and extended a languid hand.... People sometimes said that if he acted on the stage as well as he acted off....

"Delighted to see you, my dear fellow," he said. "Sit down while I rest for a minute. It takes too much out of me, this last act. Cruel work! I feel the whole pulse of the theatre beating in my own veins ... arteries."

"Strong pulse for a dying man," observed Armstrong.

"Yes: very good. You don't know, you authors, how we slave for you. Well, well; as long as you give us good strong parts, we have no quarrel with you. How's 'Easter Eggs,' by the way?"

"Oh, booked full over Christmas," said Armstrong negligently. "Such rot as it is too! I don't wonder you refused to look at it. No strong part in it. But I've got something fully in my head, and partly on paper, which might suit you better. I hear that this—this present strain on you isn't likely to continue after the middle of December. So if you feel inclined you might come round to my rooms, and you can have some supper there while I read you what I've done, and tell you about the rest."

A reassuring alacrity possessed Akroyd at this, and he made a good and steady convalescence from his prostration. He always made a point of walking home after the theatre, for the sake of his health, he said. He did not walk very fast, and often he took off his hat, and held it in his hand, so as to get the refreshing breezes of the night on his brow which "much thought expands." His tall massive form and fine tragic face often attracted a good deal of attention, and people would whisper his name as he went by. But he put up with these small penalties of publicity: it was very good for the hair to let the wind play upon it....

Akroyd some ten years ago had sprung to the front of his profession by his masterly acting of a comedy part which verged on farce. Since then he had drifted into noble middle-aged parts, such as bachelor marquises who made marriage possible between fine young fellows and girls whom the marquis was secretly in love with, husbands of fifty with wives of twenty-five, all those parts in fact in which Tact, Nobility, Breadth of View and Unselfish Wisdom untie knots for everybody else and give everybody else a Splendid Time. But his drifting, though in part dictated by his conviction that he handled these virtues as if born to the job, was due also to the fact that during these years he had really not been given a comedy that seemed to him worth risking. He knew he could always make a success as a prime minister or a marquis without any risk at all, and his luck, as less fortunate managers called it, was proverbial, for he never had a failure. But it was not luck at all that was responsible for these successes: it was fine business capacity, and a knowledge of what his following among play goers expected of him. He always gave the public what they expected, and then never disappointed them. But in his secret heart he had a longing (provided the risk was not too great) to play a rousing comic part again, to set his stalls laughing instead of leaving them dim-eyed. He was aware that he must do it soon if he was going to do it at all ... there is an age when even the most self-reliant do not feel equal to the strain of being funny.

"It's rather out of your line," said Armstrong abruptly, as he sat Akroyd down to his oysters. "But you once did a part of the same kind: it was the first play I ever saw. You were marvellously good in it."

"Ah, 'The Brittlegings,'" said Akroyd, considerably stimulated. "Old history, I'm afraid. Time of the Georges."

"Well, it's the time of the Georges again," remarked Armstrong. "The play is called 'It's a Long Lane that has Five Turnings.'"

Akroyd when discussing theatrical matters always criticised freely. An author once had suggested forty-two as a suitable age for the part that he was to play. He had considered this and replied "Forty-three. I think forty-three."

"That's a very long title," he said.

"It was a long Lane," said Armstrong. "Anyhow, it is the title. *Dramatis personae*—"

"Tell me what you have designed to be my part," said Akroyd.

"I think I shall leave you to guess. There are many points, by the way, that want discussion, and I should like your advice. But I think I will read straight through the first act without interruption."

Akroyd, as has been stated, was a very shrewd business man, but his keen appreciation of the wit and effectiveness of this act made it difficult for him to bring his business capacity into full working order. Many times throughout it had he checked his laughter, throughout it too had he *seen* himself in the glorious tragico-farcical situations provided for him, (he had no difficulty in guessing his part) in a sort of parody of his own manner. It was a brilliant piece of work, he saw himself brilliantly interpreting it. But at the end he, with an effort, put the cork into his admiration.

"Yes, yes: very clever, very sparkling," he said, "but hardly in my line, do you think? Hardly in yours, perhaps either. It would be taking a great risk: I should not expect there to be much money in it. Appreciative stalls perhaps: it is hard to say. However, read the scenario of the rest."

Frank Armstrong felt he knew quite well what this meant. It was the usual decrying of work by the intending purchaser, in order to get it cheaper, and it roused in him all the resentment that as producer he had so often felt for Craddock as capitalist. He threw the manuscript onto the table, resolved to play the same game.

"Hardly worth while," he said. "Obviously the play doesn't appeal to you, though I think it might have ten years ago, before you took to the heavy work business. I was thinking of you as I saw you first. Jove, it's thirsty work reading, and now I shall have to read it all over again to somebody else to-morrow."

"Ah, you rush at conclusions altogether too much," said Akroyd slightly alarmed. "Much necessarily depends on the working out of the play. It is admirably laid down: the scenes are full of wit and interest. I—I insist on hearing the rest."

"Shan't bother you," said Armstrong, taking whisky and soda, and enjoying himself keenly.

"Then let me take it away and read it," said Akroyd. "Really, my dear fellow, it is hardly fair to ask me here to listen to an act and the scenario of the rest, and then refuse."

"But I feel now I read it how much more suitable it would be for Tranby," said Armstrong. "I will telephone to him and read it to him to-morrow. He has been asking me if I hadn't got anything for him. I hope the oysters are good."

"Let me read it myself then, now," said Akroyd, holding out a hand that almost trembled with anxiety.

Frank gave up his obstinacy with an indifferent yawn.

"O, well: I'll tell you the rest of it," he said.

But having begun, his indifference vanished, while Akroyd's anxiety increased. To think of Tranby, his esteemed and gifted colleague, having this marvel of dexterous fooling submitted to him to-morrow, was to picture himself on the edge of a precipice. He felt giddy, his head swam at the propinquity of that catastrophic gulf. Fortunately he could crawl away now, for Armstrong was continuing.

Intentionally he did the utmost he could for the reading, giving drama and significance to the bare sketch. Here and there he had written upwards of a page of dialogue in his wonderful neat hand, and once, when he found a dozen lines of a speech by Akroyd, he passed them over to him, asking him to read them aloud (which he did, moving about the room with excellent gesticulations). Then as one of the ludicrous "turnings" approached Armstrong would drop his voice, speak slowly and huskily—"Surely he can't be fooling us this time," thought Akroyd—as the tragic moment approached. Then came another ludicrous legitimate situation of the impasse, another thwarting of ridiculous Destiny. Life became a series of brilliant conjuring tricks, all carefully explained, and the gorgeous conjuror was Akroyd.

He felt there must be no further mention of Tranby, for his nerves could not stand it. At the end he got up, and shook hands with Armstrong.

"I am much obliged to you for offering me the most brilliant piece of work I have seen for years," he said. "I will certainly accept it, and put it on when we open after Christmas. I will send you a contract to sign to-morrow—"

Frank Armstrong lit a cigarette.

"We might talk over the lines of it to-night," he said. "Else perhaps I might not sign it."

Akroyd, as was his custom, became so great an artist and so magnificent a gentleman when any question of money was brought forward that it was almost impossible to proceed.

"I am sure you will find my proposals framed on the most generous lines," he said.

Armstrong allowed the faintest shadow of a grin to hover about his mouth.

"No doubt," he said, "but there is no reason that you should not tell me what they are. Advance, for instance, on account of royalties. What do you propose?"

Akroyd put a hand to his fine brow, frowning a little.

"I think I suggested some sum to you," he said. "Eight hundred pounds advance, was it? Something like that."

Again Armstrong boiled within himself... Yet after all this was business. Akroyd wanted to pay as little as he could: he himself wanted to obtain the most possible. But it was mean, when he knew quite well that he had himself proposed a thousand pounds. It was great fun, too ... the thought of Craddock now on the bosom of the treacherous Mediterranean, perhaps being sea-sick....

"Oh, no," he said quite good naturedly. "A thousand was the sum you proposed. But I don't accept it."

The interview did not last long after this: a mere mention of Tranby's name was enough, and a quarter of an hour afterwards Akroyd went home in a taxi (as the streets were now empty) having yielded on every point, but well pleased with his acquisition. Fifteen hundred pounds down and royalties on a high scale was a good deal to give. But it seemed to him that there was a good deal to be got.

Frank sat up for another half-hour alone, in a big arm-chair, hugging his knees, and occasionally bursting out into loud unaccountable laughter. What an excellent ten-minutes scene the last half-hour would make in a play called, say "The Actor Manager" or "The Middleman." How mean people were! And how delightful fifteen hundred pounds was! But what work, what work to bring his play up to the level of the first act! But he would do it: he was not going to be content with anything but his best.

Then he laughed again.

"The Middleman ... The Sweater Thwarted.' Good play for Tranby."

He put down his expired pipe, and rose to open the window. The room was full of tobacco-smoke, the table hideous with remains of supper: it was all rather stale and sordid. Stale and sordid, too, now it was over, was his encounter with Akroyd, and his complete victory. He had scored, oh, yes, he had scored.

He leaned out for a moment into the cool freshness of the night-air, that smelt of frost, finding with distaste that his coat-sleeve on which he leaned his face reeked of tobacco. It reeked of Akroyd, too, somehow, of meanness and cunning and his own superior cunning. It was much healthier out of the window....

"Gosh, I wish I hadn't been such a pig to that jolly fellow at the play," he said to himself.

CHAPTER VII.

Philip Wroughton was sitting (not on the steps, for that would have been risky, but on a cushion on the steps of the Mena Hotel) occasionally looking at his paper, occasionally looking at the Pyramids, in a state of high content. To relieve the reader's mind at once, it may be stated that Egypt thoroughly suited him, he had not sneezed nor ached nor mourned since he got here nearly a month ago. The voyage from Marseilles, it is true, had been detestably rough, but he blamed nobody for that since he had come under the benediction of the Egyptian sun, not the captain, nor Messrs. Thomas Cook & Sons, nor Joyce—nobody. This was the sun's doing: there never was such a sun: it seemed regulated for him as a man can order the regulation of the temperature of his bath-water. It was always warm enough; it was never too hot. If you had your white umbrella you put it up; if you had forgotten it, it didn't matter: several times he had assured Joyce that it didn't matter. In every way he felt stronger and better than he had done for years, and to-day, greatly daring, he was going to mount himself, with assistance, on an Egyptian ass, and ride to see the Sphinx and make the tour of the great pyramid, in company with Craddock. It may be added that his reason for sitting on the hotel steps was largely in order to make a minute survey of the donkeys on hire just beyond. He wanted one that was not too spirited, or looked as if it wanted to canter. There was a pinkish one there that might do, but it flapped its ears in rather an ominous manner.... Perhaps Craddock would choose one for him. And glancing again at his paper he observed with singular glee that there were floods in the Thames valley.

Lady Crowborough and Joyce had gone into Cairo that morning to do some shopping and lunch with friends. This happened with considerable frequency. Not infrequently also they went to a dinner or a dance in that gay city, and stopped the night there. These dinners and dances had at first been supposed to be for Joyce's sake; they were actually, and now avowedly, for Lady Crowborough's sake, though Joyce, for more reasons than one, was delighted to accompany her. On such days as the two did not go into town, it was pretty certain that small relays of British officers and others would ride out to have lunch or tea with them at Ulena, and Lady Crowborough had several new flirts. Altogether she was amazing, prodigious. She rode her donkey every morning, as beveled as the Temple, in a blue cotton habit and with a fly-whisk, accompanied by a handsome young donkey-boy with milk white teeth, and an engaging smile. He called her "Princess," being a shrewd young man, and it is to be feared that he was to be numbered also among the new flirts. Also, as he ran behind her donkey he used to call out in Arabic "Make way for the bride O-ah!" which used to evoke shouts of laughter from his fellows. Then Lady Crowborough would ask what he was saying that made them all laugh, and with an ingenuous smile he explained that he told the dogs to get out of the way of the Princess. "And they laugh," he added "'cause they very glad to see you." This was perfectly satisfactory and she said "None of your nonsense."

Joyce beyond any doubt whatever was enjoying it all very much. The sun, the colour, the glories of the antique civilization, the kaleidoscopic novelties of the Oriental world, the gaiety and hospitality so lavishly welcoming her grandmother and herself, all these made to a girl accustomed to the restrictions and bondage of her dutiful filialness to a thoroughly selfish father, a perpetual festa and spectacle. But though she was in no way beginning to weary of it, or even get accustomed to it, she found as the full days went by that two questions, one retrospective, the other anticipatory, were beginning to occupy and trouble her. With regard to the future she was aware that Craddock was exercising his utmost power to please her and gratify her, and felt no doubt whatever as to what this accumulation of little benefits was leading up to. Before long she knew well he would ask her again to give him the right to think for her always, to see after her welfare in things great and small. In a hundred ways, too, she knew that her father wished him all success in his desire. Often he made dreadfully disconcerting remarks that were designed to be understood in the way Joyce understood them. "Ah, Joyce," he would say, "Mr. Craddock as usual has seen to that for you.... I declare Mr. Craddock guesses your inclination before you know

it yourself. He has ordered your donkey for half-past ten."... She felt that assuredly Mr. Craddock was going to send his bill in—"account rendered" this time—and ask for payment. But not possibly, not conceivably could she imagine herself paying it.

The retrospective affair occupied her more secretly, but more engrossingly. Behind all the splendour and gaiety and interest and sunlight there hung a background which concerned her more intimately than any of those things: compared with it, nothing else had colour or brightness. And her father had told her that this background was stained and daubed with dirt, with commonness, with things not to be associated with.... Never had the subject been ever so remotely alluded to again between them: Charles' name had not crossed her lips or his. She had never asked him who his informant was, but she felt that any such question was superfluous. She knew; her whole heart and mind told her that she knew. Whether she had ever actually believed the tale she scarcely remembered: anyhow she had accepted it as far as action went. But now, without further evidence on the subject, she utterly and passionately disbelieved it. By communing with herself she had arrived at the unshakeable conviction that it not only was not, but could not be true. Through quietly thinking of Charles, through telling over, like rosary beads, the hours of their intercourse together, she had seen that. It was as clear as the simplest logical proposition.

But she saw also that when Craddock repeated the question he had asked her last June, he would ask it far more urgently and authentically. There had been no fire behind it then: now, she saw that he was kindled. Before, he used to look at her with unconcealed glances of direct admiration, make her great speeches of open compliment, comparing her to a Greek Victory, a Bacchante. Now he looked at her more shyly, more surreptitiously, and he paid her compliments no longer, just because they no longer expressed all he had to say about her: they had become worn, like defaced coins out of currency.

But this acquired seriousness and sincerity of feeling on his part, which before would have earned at any rate her sympathy, now, in the conviction she held that it was he who had spoken of Charles to her father, made him the more detestable as a wooer, even as in ordinary converse he now excited her disgustful antipathy. He was as pleasant, as agreeable, as clever and adaptable as before, but her conjectured knowledge had spread through his whole personality staining and poisoning it. He had thought—so she now supposed—to put a rival out of the field by this treacherous stab in the back, to unhorse him and ride over him. In that he had bitterly erred, and though still thinking he had succeeded, deep in her heart was his disgraceful failure blazoned. And daily she felt the nightmare of his renewed proposal was coming nearer. Very possibly, she thought, he was delaying speech until they should go up the Nile, and should be leading a more leisurely, and, she was afraid, a more intimate life in the comparative quietude of Luxor, where they proposed to make a long stay. For that reason, largely, she gladly joined her grandmother in her amazing activities in Cairo and gave the kindest welcome to those pleasant young English soldiers who were so ready to come out to them.

But most of all Joyce loved to wander over the hot yellow sands of the desert, or go out alone if possible, and sit looking at the pyramids, or at the wonderful beast that lay looking earthwards with fathomless eyes of everlasting mystery, as if waiting patiently through the unnumbered centuries for the dawning of some ultimate day. Or else, ensconced in some wrinkles of the undulating ground, she would watch the hawks circling in the fathomless sky, or let her eyes wander over the peacock green of the springing crops to the city sparkling very small and bright on the edge of the Nile. A long avenue of carob trees, giving the value of Prussian blue against the turquoise of the sky and the vivid green of the rising maize and corn led in a streak across the plain to it.

She was not conscious of consecutive or orderly thought in these solitary vigils. But she knew that in some way, even as her mind and her eye were expanded by those new wonders of old time that waited alert and patient among the desert sands, so her soul also was growing in the stillness of its contemplation. She made no efforts to pry it open, so to speak, to unfold its compacted petals, for it basked in the sun and psychical air that was appropriate to it, expanding daily, silent, fragrant....

Philip had not to wait long for his escorting Craddock. He mused gleefully over the news of floods in the Thames valley, he remembered it was New Year's day to-morrow, he kept his eye on the pinkish donkey, and felt confidently daring. The pinkish donkey looked very quiet, except for the twitching ears; he hoped that Craddock would approve his choice and not want to mount him on the one that shook itself. Craddock had proposed this expedition himself, and for a minute or two Philip wondered whether he wanted to talk about anything special, Joyce for example. But he felt so well that he did not care just now what Craddock talked about, or what happened to anybody. He felt sure, too, that he would be hungry by lunch time. Really, it was insane to have let that Reynolds hang on the wall so many years and rot like blotting paper in the Thames valley. But then he had no notion that he could get five thousand pounds for it. He owed a great deal to Craddock, who at this moment came out of the hotel, large and fat and white, reassuring himself as to that point about a whisker.... Suddenly he struck Philip as being rather like a music-master on holiday at Margate who had ordered new smart riding-clothes in order to create an impression on the pier. But he looked rich.

As usual he was very, very deferential and attentive, highly approved Philip's penchant for the pinkish donkey, and selected for himself a small one that resembled in some essential manner a depressed and disappointed widow. His large legs almost touched the ground on either side of it, he could almost have progressed in the manner of the ancient velocipede. And Philip having made it quite clear that if his donkey attempted to exceed a foot's pace, he should go straight

home, and give no backshish at all, they made a start as smooth and imperceptible as the launching of a ship.

Craddock had interesting communications to make regarding the monarchs of the fourth dynasty, but his information was neither given nor taken as if it was of absorbing importance. Philip, indeed, was entirely wrapped up in observation of his donkey's movements, and the satisfaction he felt in not being in the Thames valley.

"Indeed, so long ago as that," he said. "How it takes one back! And even then the Nile floods came up here did they? Ah, by the way, the Thames is in flood. Probably my lawn is under water: I should have been a cripple with rheumatism if I had stopped there. Don't make those clicking noises, Mohammed. We are going quite fast enough. Yes, and there were three dynasties before that! I don't find the movement at all jerky or painful, my dear Craddock. I should not wonder if I rode again. Fancy my riding! I should not have believed it possible. As for you, you manage like a positive jockey. What do I say, Mohammed, if I should want to stop?"

The positive jockey, whose positiveness apparently consisted in size and weight, decided to slide away from the fourth dynasty to times and persons who more immediately concerned him.

"Indeed it is difficult to imagine such things as floods and rain," he said, "when we bask in this amazing illumination. I can't express to you my gratitude in allowing me to join your happy harmonious party."

Philip just waved his fly-whisk in the direction of the Sphinx, as if to acknowledge without making too much of its presence.

"Dear Joyce!" he said. "I think it has been and will continue to be a happy time for her. It gave me a great deal of satisfaction to be able to bring her out, though of course it entailed a certain sacrifice. Alone, I should have been able to compass the journey, I think, on the interest of what the Reynolds picture brought me: with her I have had necessarily to part with capital. Still, of what use is money except to secure health and enjoyment for others? She is looking wonderfully well."

Craddock, who had till now been standing outside his topic, took a sudden header into the very depth of it, rather adroitly.

"There is no money I would not spend on Miss Joyce's health and enjoyment," he said. "There is nothing nearer to my heart than that."

This sounded very pleasing and satisfactory, for the more Philip saw of Craddock, the more he liked him as a prospective son-in-law. But everything seemed slightly remote and unimportant today, in comparison with his own sense of comfort and well-being.

"My dear friend, I renew my assurance of sympathy and good wishes," he said. "Ah, I was afraid my donkey was going to stumble then. But I held it up: I held it up."

Craddock's habit of attention to Philip found expression before he continued that which he had come out to say.

"Anyone can see you are a rider," he said rather mechanically. "Of course you must know that my pleasure in being out here with you consisted largely in the furthering of the hope that is nearest my heart. But since we have been here (I am coming to you for counsel) I have seen so little of Miss Joyce. Often, of course, she is engaged, and that I quite understand. But she has seemed to me rather to avoid me, to—to shun my presence. And hers, I may say, grows every day more dear and precious to me."

Craddock was really moved. Beneath his greed for money, his unscrupulousness in getting it, his absorption in his plundering of and battenning on those less experienced than he, there was something that was capable of feeling, and into that something Joyce had certainly made her way. The depth of the feeling was not to be gauged by the fact, that, in its service, he would do a dishonourable thing, for that, it is to be feared, was a feat that presented no overwhelming natural difficulties to him. But his love for Joyce had grown from liking and admiration into a thing of fire, into a pure and luminous element. It did not come wholly from outside; it was not like some rainbow winged butterfly, settling for a moment on carrion. It was more like some celestial-hued flower growing, if you will, out of a dung-heap. It might, it is true, have been fed and nourished in a soil of corruption and dishonour, but by that divine alchemy that love possesses, none of this had passed into its colour and its fragrance. It was not dimmed or cankered by the nature of the soil from which it grew, it was splendid with its own nature. And every day, even as he had said, it became more dear and precious to him.

"I don't know if you have noticed any of this, I mean any of her avoidance of me."

Philip was able to console, quite truthfully. He hadn't noticed anything at all, being far too much taken up in himself.

"Indeed I have seen nothing of the kind," he said, "and I do not think I am naturally very unobservant. Besides, Joyce, I think, guesses how warmly I should welcome you as a son-in-law. Ah, I held my donkey up again! He would have been down unless I had been on the alert. No, no, my dear Craddock, you are inventing trouble for yourself. Lovers habitually do that: they fancy their mistress is unkind. I recommend you to wait a little, be patient, until we get out of all this *va-et-vient* of Cairo. It is true Joyce is much taken up with my mother and her social excesses—I think I am not harsh in calling them excesses at her age. In the romance and poetry of—of Luxor and all that—you will find my little Joyce a very tender-hearted girl, very affectionate, very grateful for affection. Not that I admit she has shunned or avoided you, not for a moment. Far

from it. Don't you remember how pleased she was when she knew you were coming with us? Mohammed, stop the donkey: I am out of breath."

Craddock reined in also: the depressed widow was not very unwilling to stop and he stepped off her, and stood by Philip.

"This is not too much for you, I hope," he said.

"Not at all, not at all. I am enjoying my ride, and positively I have not had to use my fly-whisk at all. I was wondering how I should manage it as well as my reins. But there are no flies. No, my dear fellow, don't be down-hearted. Joyce likes you very well."

"Then I shall tempt my fate without waiting any longer," he said. "If I am fortunate, I shall be happiest of men, and, I may add, the cheerfulest of travelling companions. If otherwise, I think I shall go back to England at once. The situation would be intolerable."

Philip was perfectly aghast. For a moment he could say nothing whatever.

"But that would be out of the question," he said. "I do not see how we could get on without you. Who would make our arrangements, and settle the hundred little questions that arise when one is travelling. I could not do it: my health would completely break down. Perhaps, too, my mother will stay on in Cairo: if it suits her fancy, I am sure she will, and Joyce is utterly incapable of arranging for our comfort in the way in which you do. I should be left without a companion, for, as you see, Joyce has become totally independent of me. And your valet, who, at your direction, is so kind as to look after me, and pack for me, and see to my clothes, no doubt you would take him with you. It was understood, I thought, that you would make the entire journey with us: you can hardly mean what you have just said. It would spoil everything; it would break up our party altogether. Pray assure me that you do not mean what you say. The idea agitates me, and any agitation, as you know, is so bad for me. Besides, of course this is the root of the whole matter—that is why I state it to you last after those minor considerations—your best opportunity, your most favourable chance, is when we are alone and quiet up the Nile. We are living in a mere railway station here: none of us have a minute to ourselves."

Till he heard this rapid staccato speech, Craddock felt he had never really known what egotism meant. Here it was *in excelsis*: almost grand and awe-compelling in this gigantic and inspired exhibition of it....

"I am very much agitated," said Philip, haloing and crowning it. "Do not leave my donkey, Mohammed."

In spite of the danger of prolonging this agitation Craddock was silent for a moment, and Philip had one more remark to make.

"It would be very selfish," he said, "and very unlike you. And I am sure it would not be wise."

Craddock hesitated no longer. He had received a certain assurance—though he could not estimate its value—that his interpretation of Joyce's bearing towards him was mistaken; he had been recommended, a course which seemed sensible, to wait for the comparative quiet of Luxor, where the relations of their party would naturally be more intimate and familiar; he had also had ocular evidence that Philip was perfectly capable of having a fit, if he precipitated matters unsuccessfully, and returned home. All these considerations pointed one way.

"Certainly I will continue your journey with you," he said. "It is delightful to me to find how solidly you have been counting on me. And from my point of view—my own personal point of view—I think you have probably indicated to me the most promising course. I exceedingly regret the agitation I have caused you."

Philip mopped his forehead.

"It is nothing," he said. "I will make an effort, and become my own master again. But I do not think I feel up to continuing our ride. Let us turn. Perhaps to-morrow I shall feel more robust. I should like to rest a little before lunch. And take heart of grace, my dear man: I felt just like you once, and how happily it turned out for me."

This was not true: Philip had never been in love with anybody. Joyce's mother, however, had soon overcome his somewhat feeble resistance to her charms, and had led him a fine life for the few years that she was spared to him.

Our party had designed to stay in Egypt two months altogether, and a month being now spent and Lady Crowborough being at length a little fatigued by her whirl of gaiety in Cairo, it was settled that day at lunch that they should proceed southwards up the Nile in a few days' time, going by steamer all the way, in order to save Philip's nerves the jar and jolting of the ill-laid line. Lady Crowborough's flirts came in flocks to see her off, bringing bouquets and confectionery enough to fill both her cabin and Joyce's, and she made a variety of astounding speeches in a brilliant monologue to them all, addressing first one and then another.

"All you young men are trying to spoil me," she said, "and it's lucky I've got my grand-daughter with me to play chaperone and see you don't go too far. And are these chocolates for me, too? Joyce, my dear, put them in my cabin, and lock them up; I shall have a good blow-out of them as soon as we start. As for you, Mr. Wortledge, I daren't stop in Cairo a day longer because of you. You'd be coming round for me in a cab and driving me off to a mosque or a synagogue or some

such heathen place of worship, to be married to you, under pretence of showing me the antiquities, and what would Mr. Stuart do then? I never saw such roses, Mr. Stuart. Joyce, my dear—oh, she's gone with the chocolate. I shall wear a fresh one every day, that's what I shall do, and make pot-pourri of the leaves, and put it among my clothes, if that'll content you. And there's a note attached to them, I see. I shan't open that till I'm alone, so that no one shall see my blushes. And I'll be bound you'll all be flirting with some other old woman the moment my back's turned, because I know your ways."

A shrill whistle warned her that this court *de congé* must draw to an end, and she began shaking hands with them all.

"You've all made my stay in Cairo uncommonly pleasant," she said, "and I thank you all with all my heart. You're dear nice boys, all of you, and I'm really broken-hearted to say goodbye to you. Goodbye all of you."

And this charming old lady, with real tears in her eyes, put up all her veils, and kissed away handfuls of her delicious little white fingers, as the boat began to churn the green Nile water into foam. Then she went to her cabin, had a good blow-out of chocolate, and slept the greater part of the three days' voyage up to Luxor with intervals for food, and a few expeditions to temples on donkey-back. She had bought ropes and ropes of ancient Egyptian beads in the bazaars, with which she adorned herself, and when a professor of antiquities (otherwise promising) hinted that they were modern and came from Manchester, she told him he knew nothing about it, and was dead cuts with him ever afterwards.

Craddock, now that he was committed not to separate himself from the party, was in no hurry to put his fortune to the test. In spite of Philip's assurance, he still fancied he had been right regarding Joyce's avoidance of him, and until their stay was beginning to draw to an end and Philip had begun to fuss about having a sufficiency of warmer underclothing put in his steamer trunk, so that even when the weather grew colder as they sailed northwards again across the Mediterranean, he should be able to sit out on deck without risk of chill, devoted himself to restoring Joyce's confidence in and ease of intercourse with him. Many times, it so happened, he was alone with her, going on some expedition that Philip declared himself not equal to, while Lady Crowborough's appetite for antiquities had proved speedily satiated. Indeed, she announced when she had been at Luxor a week that the sight of any more temples would make her sick. Thus he was often Joyce's only companion and, while waiting his time, made himself an admirable guide and comrade. He had studied the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties before, and with the air of a friendly tutor interested her in the history and monuments. He soon saw how apt she was to learn and appreciate, and by degrees re-established unembarrassing relations with her, winning her back to frank intercourse with him. With his knowledge and his power of vividly and lightly presenting it, he succeeded in weaving their true antique charm about the temples and silent tombs, and Joyce found herself taking the keenest enjoyment in their long sunny days together. To her immense relief, he seemed to have banished altogether his yearning for another relationship, and she told herself she must have been quite wrong in imagining that he would approach her again, and this time with fire. Yet she had been so convinced of it, and here he was with day-long opportunities at his disposal, plunging her to her infinite satisfaction in the heresies of Amenhotep, and the Elizabethan rule of Hatasoo. He unfolded the stories of the carven walls for her, with their hawk-faced gods or adoring kings. He traced for her the merchandise that the queen's expedition to the Land of Plenty brought back with it, ivory and apes, as in the days of Solomon, and gold weighed in the balances by overseers. He told her of Sen-mut the architect of Deir-el-Bahari, to whom the queen showed all her heart, and entrusted with the secrets of her will, and how Thothmes, on his mother's death, erased from the inscriptions all mention of the low-born fellow.... Then day by golden day went on, and Joyce's confidence increased, and her debt of pleasant hours to him grew heavier and was less felt by her. But never did she quite get out of her mind that it was he who had said, she knew not quite what, to her father, speaking evil of the boy who painted beside the weir. Could she have been wrong about that, too? If so, she had indeed wronged this large kindly man, who was never weary of his pleasant efforts to interest her. Her manner to him changed as her confidence returned, and with the changing of her manner, he drew nearer to confidence in himself.

But it must not be imagined that all life's inner workings, with regard to Craddock, were centred in this successful charming of Joyce to comradeship with him, nor in restraining himself from attempting to pluck the fruit while clearly unripe. Week by week there came to him the most satisfactory accounts from the box-office with regard to the reaped and ever-ripening harvest, so to speak, of "Easter Eggs." But against that solid asset he had to set, not indeed a positive loss, but a sacrifice of what might have been a tremendous gain. For "The Long Lane that had Five Turnings"—was there ever so insolently careless a title?—had appeared early in January, and all London rocked with it. Akroyd had clearly made the biggest hit of his industrious career, and the author had leaped at this second spring over the heads of all other dramatists. Critics, even the most cautious of them, seemed to have lost their heads, and "Sheridan redivivus" was among their less extravagant expressions. His informant as to all this was Frank Armstrong himself, who very thoughtfully sent him a stout packet of these joyful cries, as supplied to him by a press-agency, and with it a letter that seemed to touch the pinnacles of impertinence.

"You have often told me," wrote this amiable young man, "of the great interest you take in my work, and so I am certain you will be pleased to hear of the success of the play. I have to thank you also for the hint you so kindly gave me about screwing Akroyd up to favourable terms, and I made a bargain for myself about the scale of royalties that really was stupendous. About the play itself—it is not being a very good theatrical season generally, and even Peter, I hear, isn't

panning out very well, but you should see the queues at the Pall-Mall. Golly! It's the same in the stalls and boxes. Mrs. Fortescue has taken a box every night next week, and I think I have persuaded Akroyd to raise prices. He says it is illegitimate, but I rather think he will do it. After all the rule of supply and demand must affect prices. I'm afraid 'Easter Eggs' is bound to suffer; indeed, it was distressingly empty the other night, but the box office says it will recover again ... I see there is a flat vacant just below yours in Berkeley Square. I am thinking of taking it. It will be nice to be near you. I can never forget what you did for me over my first play.... Also, after an unpropitious beginning, I have struck up a friendship with Charles Lathom. He has told me, in confidence, how you played Providence to him. I hope you will do well over him. I should think you would, people are talking about him, and he has several sitters. I tried to tell him all you have done for me, but the recollection was too much. The words wouldn't come, so I pretended to burn my finger over a pipe I was lighting, and said 'Damn!' Was not that clever and dramatic?

"I enclose quantities of press-notices, and I wish I could see your delight over them. It was very vexing that you were not here for the first night, for I should have liked to have seen what you said. But perhaps when I saw it, I shouldn't have liked it, as I remember you didn't think very much of the play when I read it to you. Perhaps I shall take a long holiday now, not write again at all for a year or two. I am besieged with repeats, of course."

That threat did not much alarm Craddock. He felt as convinced, as he felt with regard to the rising of the sun, that the young man could not keep off it. But there was the very scorpion of a sting in the sentence immediately preceding, in which he was reminded of his own rejection of the play. His wits must have been wandering that night; his *flair* for anticipating public taste had never betrayed him with so desperate a lapse of perception. And somehow it gave him unease to think that an assured enemy of his, sharper than a serpent's tooth, should have thus leaped into affluence as well as prominence. Nor did he like this growing friendship between Charles and the other—he did not like any of the letter, nor any of the press notices. His evening was completely spoiled and Mr. Wroughton beat him at *béziq*ue. But next morning, with that power which was not the least of his gifts, he switched his mind off these disturbances and fixed himself heart and soul on that which lay before him here and now.

Thus passed for them at Luxor a complete moon, which among other celestial offices had magically illumined for them an hour of night among the ruins of Karnak. Then, too, they had gone about, and there up till then had come the hardest struggle in restraint for him. All the spell of the starry-kirtled night was woven round them while the huge monoliths and spent glory of the columned hall reminded him, urgently, insistently, how short life was, how soon for the generations of men nothing but the hard granite of their work remains, no joy, no rapture any more, for eyes are closed and mouths dumb, and the soft swift limbs laid to rest, where at the most they can but feel the grasses that wave over their graves, or, more horribly, injected and wrapped in cero-cloth and bitumen to be preserved as a parody and mocking of what they once were. And this—these few years—was his time, his innings before the silence that preceded closed in on him again. All he wanted stood in front of him now, as Joyce leaned on a fragment of wall white and tall in the moonlight, and let her great eyes wander over the outlined columns, with young fresh mouth a little parted, and hand almost resting on his.

"Yes, it is all later than—" he heard his voice saying, and suddenly he stopped, feeling that to talk here and now and to her of Egyptian kings was a mere profanity, in this temple which his love had built, so much holier than all that had ever been made with hands.

But at his sudden cessation, he saw Joyce withdraw herself a little, instinctively on guard. Bitterly he saw that.

"It is all so woundingly sad," he said, "this eternal glorious moon and sky, looking down on to what in so few years is but ruin and decay. And yet they thought that their houses would endure for ever—"

Joyce instantly recovered her confidence, and flowed to meet him on this.

"Oh, yes, oh yes," she said, "all this month that has been haunting me. I think I hate the moon to-night. It is like some dreadful imperishable governess, always presiding and watching us poor children."

That broke the tension.

"Oh, Mistress Moon," said Craddock laughing. "But she is a governess of remarkable personal attractions...."

Then the last day of their sojourn came. Joyce, immensely reassured by her own mistaken conviction that he was going to speak that night at Karnak, and slightly ashamed of herself, had nothing left of the trouble she had anticipated at Cairo, and with regard to retrospect, that which had also been a conviction to her, though not absolutely vanished, was as remote as the imperishable governess. That day the two companions had settled to spend not in detailed study, for indeed they had gathered a most creditable crop, nor even in farewell visits to shrines, but in a general out-door survey and assimilation of river and temple and desert and sky, a long exposed photograph, so to speak, of panorama to take back to the fogs of a northern February. Soon after breakfast they took ferry over the Nile, and joining their donkeys there, rode straight away from the river, going neither to the right nor left, up the narrow path between fast-rising stretches of lengthening crops, past the two great silent dwellers on the plain, who, looking ever eastward,

wait for the ultimate dawn that shall touch mute lips again to song, through the huddled mud-houses of Gûrnak, and up and beyond and out till the level green was left below them, and they met the sand-dried untainted air of the desert. Here on the brow of the sandstone cliffs they dismounted, while Josef bestowed their lunch in a cool shadow of a rock in this thirsty land.

Joyce sat down on this bluff.

"We can't dispose of the flesh-pots of Egypt yet," she said, nodding at the provision basket. "May we sit here a little, Mr. Craddock, and will you let me say my eighteenth dynasty catechism, and then——"

Joyce turned to him.

"We must plan out this day so carefully," she said, "as it is the last. I want to sit here quite silent for about half-an-hour, and if it isn't rude, out of sight of you, and everybody, and just look, look, get all that—the river, the crops, the sky, the temples, right deep down. Then let us have lunch, and then let us go a long ride out into the desert, where there isn't anybody or anything. And then, oh, oh, we shall have to go back, and the last day will be over. I promised father to go and call on the chaplain after tea with him. Chaplain! He's a dear man, but think—chaplain on the last day!"

Joyce's desired menu of the mind was served to her. She said her eighteenth dynasty kings, and then strolled along the edge, of the cliffs till she was out of sight and sound of donkey and donkey-boy and Craddock. The magic of the land indeed had made its spell for her, and now she wanted just to look, to absorb, to be wrapped in it. Then, just because she had planned this her mind grew restive and fidgety.... She had determined on her own account to speak a grateful word to Mr. Craddock to-day for all he had done for her, and she felt she must thank him too for his unremitting attention to her father. He, she felt sure, would not do so, and Joyce felt that the family must discharge that indebtedness. It seemed a simple task enough to perform, but she could not in imagination frame a suitable sentence, either about that or her own debt to him, and insensibly beginning to worry about it, she lost the mood that she had come here to capture. Craddock and her imminent acknowledgment to him "drave between her and the sun" and her half hour alone proved a not very satisfactory item.

She went back to him at the end of it, and found that he had already spread their lunch.

"And you have had a 'heart-to-heart' talk with Egypt?" he asked. "I thought I heard sobs."

Joyce laughed.

"They were sobs of rage then," she said. "My plan broke down. I could think of everything under the sun except Egypt. Just because I meant to gaze and meditate, I could not meditate at all. But I am so hungry; that is something. How good of you to have made ready!"

Hard-boiled eggs and sandwiches, however hungry the attack, do not need much time for their due disposition, and in a quarter of an hour Craddock had lit a cigarette, preparatory for their ride into the desert. And this seemed to Joyce a very suitable moment for the dischargal of her thanks and compliments.

"I've had a burden on my mind so long, Mr. Craddock," she said, "and that is to let you know just in so many words how I appreciate all that you have done for us. Your presence has made the whole difference to my father——"

She had begun to speak, not looking at him, but at the hot sand at her feet. But here a sudden movement of his, a shifting of his place so that he sat just a little nearer her, made her look up. At the same moment she saw that he flung away the cigarette he had only just lit. Then she looked at his face, and saw that his mouth was a little open, and that his breath came quickly. And she knew the moment she had feared a month ago, but had allowed herself to think of as averted, hovered close to her.

"And has my presence made any difference to you?" he asked.

Joyce knew the futility of fencing, as everybody does who knows a crisis is inevitable. But until the end of the world everybody will continue to fence.

"Of course it has," she said. "I was just going to speak of that and thank you for it all."

He drew himself quite close to her.

"There is just one way, and no more in which you can thank me," he said, "and it is by letting me offer for your acceptance all my services and all my devotion."

The fire, the authentic primal need was there, and though she shrank from it, though instinctively she hated it, she could refuse it neither with respect nor sympathy. She could not interrupt him, either: what he had to say must come: it was his bare right to speak.

He took up her hand, and clasped it with both of his, enclosing it, as it were, in a damp dark cavern. At that, without being able to help it, she drew back a little.

"O stop: don't," she said.

He seemed not to hear.

"I offer you much more than I knew was mine to offer last June," he said. "You were so right, Joyce, to refuse me. But it is so different now. You have woke in me, or created in me, a power for love which I did not know was mine. Surely you know that. You created it: it is yours. Take it, for what you made is me."

He paused a moment; then seemed suddenly to realize that he had said all that could be said.... A little wind drove upwards from the plain below, fluttering the papers which had held their sandwiches. Joyce hated herself for noticing that. Then she tried to withdraw her hand.

"Oh I am so sorry, so sorry," she said. "It is quite impossible, more impossible than ever. I mean—I don't know what I mean. But I can't."

She knew very well what she meant when she said "more impossible than ever." And mixed with her regret which was wholly genuine, was a sort of nausea of her soul.... Once more she felt she knew who had spoken to her father of Charles. The motive, too, was as clear as the sunshine. She loathed this continued contact. But it only lasted a second more. The tone of her reply would have carried conviction to the most ardent of lovers. He dropped her hand.

"I have done," he said.

He got up, and walked a few paces away, and stood there with his back to her. A quantity of disconnected pictures went through the blank impassivity of his mind. He remembered the look of the green packet of tickets for their passage down the Nile to-morrow, which he had seen on his table before he went out this morning. He heard Philip's voice say, "Take care of my little Joyce!" He felt himself licking the envelope which contained Mr. Ward's cheque for five thousand pounds. He had the vision of another cheque for ten thousand and one hundred pounds. He saw the sketch of Joyce that had stood beneath the lamp in her room on the evening the chimneys smoked at the Mill House. He heard himself console Charles for the "queer note" Philip Wroughton had written him. Collectively, these presented their whole case, his whole connection with the Wroughtons, succinctly and completely. And the curtain fell on them.

He went back to Joyce, who was sitting by the side of the fluttering paper with her head in her hands.

"What would you like to do?" he said. "Shall we take our ride into the desert or go home?"

Joyce got up.

"Oh, let us go home," she said. "Please call Mohammed. And do realize I am sorry, I am very sorry."

But there was nothing in him now that could respond to or help the girl's evident distress. It seemed that the wonderful flower that grew out of him had been plucked.... Only the soil out of which it grew remained, and that was exactly what it had always been.

That night when Lady Crowborough went up to bed, she was not surprised to hear Joyce's tap on her door a moment afterwards. She had felt the constraint that had hung over dinner like a thunder-cloud, though Philip, flushed with victory at the ideal disposition in the packing of his underclothing which had occurred to him as he dozed or slept,—he thought "slept,"—before dinner, had been unconscious of all else.

"Come in, my dear," she said, "and tell me all that's happened."

"Oh, Granny, he has proposed again," said Joyce.

"Lor', my dear, do you think I didn't guess that? And you needn't trouble to tell me that you refused him. Well, Joyce, I can't say I'm sorry, though I suppose he's rich and agreeable enough, for I never could stand stout white men myself. Give me one of my cigarettes, dear, and sit down and have a talk. There's nothing I enjoy more than a cigarette and a talk about love just before going to bed. Gives such pleasant dreams."

Joyce could not help giggling. But she knew well the golden heart that beat behind these surprising flippancies.

"But I'm sorry, Granny," she said, "but—but I'm afraid I'm not sorry enough."

"No, my dear," said this astute old lady, "if you were sorry enough you'd say 'yes' instead of 'no.' Let me see, this is the second go, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, then I hope this time that you made it plain. The man whom you don't mean to have gets tedious if he goes on. I used to tell them so."

Joyce had come here to do much more than merely announce the event to her grandmother. There was so much more she wanted to say, but she felt it would be easier if it came out in answer to questions. Probably Grannie was wise enough to ask the right questions....

"I think I made it plain," she said. "I said it was quite impossible: more impossible than ever."

Lady Crowborough in the dusk allowed herself to beam all over her face.

"And what did you mean by that, my dear?" she said. "To me it sounds as if there was nobody else last June, but somebody else now."

"Oh, Grannie, it means just that," said Joyce in a whisper.

"And was it any of my flirts in Cairo?" asked Lady Crowborough, who liked a little joking even when her heart was most entirely tender and sympathetic. Quite truly, she believed it "helped things out" to grin over them.

Joyce grinned.

"No, not in Cairo," she said.

"Then it was that flirt of mine down at the Mill House, who's going to paint my picture," she exclaimed. "Don't deny it, my dear. A nice boy, too, though he ain't got a penny. However, we'll talk about the pennies afterwards. Now do you think he fancies you at all? Don't be so silly, Joyce, hiding your face like that."

"Yes, Grannie, I think he does. I can't be sure, you know I—I haven't had any experience."

"Lor', my dear, what do you want with experience over that sort o' thing?" asked Lady Crowborough. "And if you're too modest to say, I'll say it for you. He does like you and you know it. I saw him, the wretch, looking at you in the right way. So I don't understand what all the fuss is about. You like him, and he likes you. Eh?"

The cleverest of grandmothers could not guess the further confidence that Joyce wanted to make. She had to open it herself.

"But—but there's a difficulty, Grannie," she said. "Somebody has told father that he's not—not nice, that he isn't the sort of person he would like me to know. Father wouldn't let him come down to see his copy of the Reynolds while we were there because of that. And I feel sure I know who it is who told him that, and why he said it."

"That Craddock?" asked Lady Crowborough quickly.

"Yes: and I can't believe it is true. I don't believe it. Oh, Grannie, dear, what a comfort you are."

Lady Crowborough's shrewd little face entirely ceased to beam.

"And I don't believe it either, my dear," she said. "He seemed as decent a young fellow as I ever saw. But you can leave that to me. I'll find out, if it was your Craddock who said it first of all. It's only your suspicion as yet, Joyce, and whatever you do, my dear, don't you go through life suspecting anybody, and then not doing him the justice to find out if you're right. And then after that we must find out if there's any truth in it, and what the truth is."

"Oh, but will you, can you?" asked Joyce.

"Yes, my dear, unless I die in the night, which God forbid. I'll Craddock him! And here am I doing just the same as you, and treating your suspicions as true before I know. Lor, but it does seem likely, don't it? And now about what has happened to-day? Are you going to tell your father or is he?"

"Mr. Craddock thought we had better say nothing about it at present," said Joyce. "I expect he is quite right. He said he thought father would be very much upset. That was as we rode back. Oh, Grannie, fancy saying that! I think he meant it as a sort of final appeal. Or perhaps he meant it quite nicely. I'm sure Father wanted me to marry him. But that didn't seem a good enough reason."

Lady Crowborough began to beam again.

"Not with your Mr. Lathom waiting for you," she said. "Well, now, my dear, you must let me go to bed. I'm glad you told me all about it, and I can tell you now I should have thought very poorly of you if you had accepted this Mr. Craddock. Did he kiss you, my dear?"

Joyce again felt an inward bubble of laughter.

"No, thank goodness," she said.

"That's a good thing. You wait till you get back to town. There's somebody there—bless me, how I keep getting ahead. Now send me my maid, Joyce, and don't give way, my dear. And when I say my prayers I'm not sure I shan't give thanks that you ain't going to be Mrs. Craddock. I don't like the man and I don't like the name, and that's sufficient."

In spite of this distaste, Lady Crowborough did Craddock the justice to admit that he behaved very well next day. His invaluable gift for "switching off" stood him in good stead, his manner was perfectly normal again, and sitting on the deck of the northward going steamer after lunch he talked to her about the Exhibition of old Masters at Burlington House, which was now open.

"There are a dozen fine Reynolds there," he said, "but none finer, I think, than the one that used to be at the Mill House."

Lady Crowborough affected a very skilful carelessness.

"But what prices for a bit of canvas and a daub of paint," she said. "I can't see a bit of difference between it and the copy. That was a nice young fellow who did it too. I was sorry that you had to give so bad a report of him to my son."

Craddock hardly paused. He assumed that Philip had said something to his mother about it, and though he would not have chosen that his name should have been mentioned as informant, he felt it was useless to deny it. Nor did he wish to: jealousy, impotent and bitter, took hold of him.

"Yes, a loose young fellow, I am afraid," he said. "But I am doing what I can for him, for his gift is perfectly marvellous. Indeed, I should not wonder if he is some day known among the greatest English masters. As I was saying, there are some very fine Reynolds in the Exhibition. I had the pleasure of getting hold of one or two for them. You must see it...."

"Oh, drat the Exhibition," she said.

She explained that a sudden twinge of neuralgia had visited her, and put on several veils.

CHAPTER VIII.

One morning towards the end of March Frank Armstrong was sitting in Charles' studio with a writing-pad on the table in front of him, a sucked out pipe upside down between his lips, a corrugated forehead, rumpled hair, and an expression of the wickedest ill-humour on his face. Beside him on the floor a waste-paper basket vomited half sheets of futile manuscript, and other crumpled up and rejected pages strewed the floor. At the far end of the studio Charles was encamped, he and his manuscript on the model's stand, painting, as he had done in the portrait of his mother, from a position above the sitter. It gave an opportunity of subtle foreshadowing which was a holy joy if you could do it right, which he was quite convinced he could. An expression of vivid and absorbed content—absorbed he was by the sight of Frank wrestling with his work, and cursing and swearing at his difficulties—pervaded his face. To him, from the artistic point of view, that angry scowling countenance was a beatific vision. Frank had come earlier than he had expected that morning, bringing his work with him as desired, and Charles, half dressed only in loose shirt and flannel trousers, had hopped on to his seat immediately, for Frank with scarcely a word of greeting had sat down at once to struggle with a troublesome situation. Seated there, with his sheaf of spear-like paint-brushes, and his young and seraphic face, he looked like some modern variation of St. Sebastian. Frank had already remarked this with singular annoyance.

Charles smiled and stared and painted.

"If you could manage to put that pipe out of your mouth for five minutes, Frank," he said tentatively.

"But I couldn't."

"It doesn't matter a bit," said Charles cordially.

Frank instantly took it out, and Charles had to stop painting for a moment, for he was so entertained by the brilliance of his own guilefulness that his hand trembled. But in a moment he got to work again, and began whistling under his breath.

"Oh, do stop that row," said Frank.

The picture had been begun a month ago, and was nearing completion. At present Charles was pleased with it, which is saying a good deal. His mother on the other hand thought Mr. Armstrong was not quite such a bear as that. And Mr. Armstrong had said "You don't know much about bears." Charles' first request to paint him had met with a firm refusal. But very shortly after Frank had said,

"You can do a picture of me if you like, Charles. But on one condition only, that you let me buy it of you in the ordinary way."

This time the refusal came from the artist. But a second attempt on Frank's part met with better success.

"You don't understand about the picture," he said. "I really want it for mercantile reasons. I'll pay you whatever Mrs. Fortescue paid, and I shall think I've made an excellent bargain, just as she does. People are talking about you. You'll get double these prices next year. Then I shall sell my picture and buy some more beer and perhaps give you a tip. I'm as hard as nails about money: don't you think I'm doing you a favour. And as a word of general advice, do get rid of a little of your sickly humility. You're like Uriah Heep. Isn't he Mrs.—Mrs. Heep?"

Mrs. Lathom looked up at him very gravely.

"There is something in what you say, Master Copperfield," she observed.

This morning, after Charles' whistling had been thus peremptorily stopped, the work went on in silence for some quarter-of-an hour. Then Frank gave a great shout.

"I've got it," he said, and began scribbling and reading as he scribbled. "It isn't that you don't believe me, it's that you are able not to believe me. Yes: that's it, and the British public won't understand the least what it means, so we'll put 'Long pause.' And then they will give a great sigh as if they did. Now it's plain sailing."

His face cleared, as the pen began to move more rapidly, and when Charles looked up at him again, the St Sebastian air left him altogether.

"You are perfectly useless if you smile in that inane manner," he said.

"Perfectly useless: perfectly useless," said Frank absently.

But soon his inane smile left him: he was in difficulties again, and Charles greatly prospered.

Frank got up and yawned.

"I'm worked out," he said. "Charles, it's a dog's life. And all the time I'm not doing it for myself: there's the rub. I've been grinding here all morning, and have done a couple of pages: if I sit and grind every day like this for a couple of months perhaps I may get it done. And then I shall go with my hat in my hand, on bended knee to that old fat cross-legged Buddha, who sits there sniffing up the incense of our toil, and say 'Please, Mr. Craddock, will this do? Will you deign to accept this humble token from your worshipper?'"

"I can hear you say it," said Charles, half shutting his eyes to look at his work, and not attending to Frank.

Frank jumped up onto the model stand, putting his hand on Charles' shoulder to steady himself.

"No you can't," said Frank, "because I never shall say it. Charles, I'm sure that's libellously like me. Shall I bring an action against you for it, or shall I merely topple you and the stool over onto the floor?"

"Whichever you please. It is pretty like you, you know."

Charles looked up at him.

"But not when you look like that. Why this unwonted good temper?"

"It will soon pass. I think it's because I've done a good bit of work. Oh, Lord, it will soon pass. All for Craddock, you know. I wish to heaven I could infect you with some of my detestation of him."

Charles frowned.

"Oh, do give up trying," he said. "It's no use arguing about it. Of course he's making the devil of a lot of money out of you, and it's very annoying if you look at that fact alone. But where would you have been if he hadn't put on 'Easter Eggs' for you? Sleeping beneath the church-yard sod as like as not. And I daresay he's going to make something out of me. Well, where would I have been if he hadn't bought that picture of Reggie, and come to look at my things? In the Sidney Street garret still. Instead of which——" and Charles waved a paint brush airily round his studio.

Frank relit his pipe, and began gathering up the débris of his rejected manuscript.

"You oughtn't to be allowed about alone," he said. "You say 'Kind man!' too much. You're like a fat baby that says 'Dada' to everybody in the railway carriage. I tell you people aren't kind men. They want to 'do' you. They want to get the most they can out of you."

"And you out of them," said Charles.

"Within limits. Kind Craddock hasn't got any limits. Besides, I don't humbug people."

"Nor does——"

"Well, he tries to. He tried to humbug me, telling me he took such an interest in me and my work. He didn't: he took an interest in the money he thought he could make out of it. Oh, it isn't only Craddock: it's everybody: it's the way the world's made. I'm not sure women aren't the worst of all. Look at the way they all took me up when 'Easter Eggs' came out. I didn't see why at first. But it's plain enough now. They thought I should make some more successes—just like Craddock,—and then I should take them to the theatre and give them dinner——"

"Oh, bosh," said Charles very loud.

"It's not bosh. The idea that fellows like you have of women is enough to make one ill. You think they are tender, and self-sacrificing, and helpless and trustful and loving. Helpless! Good Lord. An ordinary modern girl is as well able to take care of herself among men as a Dreadnought among fishing smacks. She sidles along just turning her screw and then 'Bang, Bang!' she blows them all out of the water if she doesn't want them, and sucks them in if she does, and lets down a great grappling iron from her deck and hauls them on board. And when they are married they are supposed to be clinging and devoted and absorbed in their husbands and babies. Was there ever such a misconception? Why, supposing you find a block of women on the pavement opposite a shop, you may bet ten thousand to one that that shop is a dress-maker's, or a seller of women's clothes. They stand glued to the glass like flies on fly paper, thinking how sweet they would look in that eight guinea walking dress. And when they have to move away they walk with their heads still looking at the windows, stupefied and fascinated, still gazing at some dreadful white corset trimmed with lace, or open-work stockings. And they aren't thinking how ravished their silly Dick or Harry will be to see them in that new skirt, with the foolish open-work stockings peeping out below it, they are thinking how ravishing they will look when other women see them in it, and how greenly jealous other women will be. If they were thinking of their husbands, they would be imagining how ravishing darling Dick or Harry would look in that cheviot tweed. But not they!"

"Oh, put it all into one of your rotten plays," said Charles.

"Not I, thank you. The Dreadnoughts would blow me out of the water. But I'm saying it to you for your good. You trust people too much, men and women alike. You go smiling and wagging your tail like a puppy, thinking that everybody is going to be kind and tender and unselfish. Especially foolish is your view of women. You've got a sense of chivalry, and a man with a sense of chivalry always gets left. You're just as absurd about men too: you think people are nice to you, because they like you: it is very conceited of you——"

"Oh, I was Uriah Heep not long ago," remarked Charles.

"So you are still. But the truth is that people seem to like one in order to be able to get something

out of one. Who of all men in the world now is going about saying perfectly fulsome things about me? Why, that slimy Akroyd, because he is making his fortune out of me. But he tried to 'do' me all right over the play. Craddock too: I'm told he is always saying nice things about me. That's because he wants me to put my very best work into the plays I have got to write for him."

Charles remembered that Craddock had said not altogether nice things about Frank on one occasion. He often remembered that, but, as often he remembered also that they were expressly meant for his private ear. The fact lurked always in his mind, in the shadow into which he had deliberately pushed it.

"And here we are back at Craddock," he said.

"Yes. Oh, by the way, Charles, I saw a flame of yours last night, a very old flame in fact, Lady Crowborough. I daresay you would have thought she was being tender and solicitous about you. I thought that she was merely extremely inquisitive."

"About me?" said Charles.

"Yes. She wanted to know all I could tell her about you. She reminded me of somebody wanting to engage a servant from a previous employer."

Charles looked thoroughly puzzled.

"Lady Crowborough?" he asked again. "About me?"

"Yes, I've already said so. What's the matter?"

Charles had risen, and came across to where Frank sat in the window seat. Into his head there had instantaneously flashed the episode of his proposing himself to go down to the Mill House to look at his Reynolds' copy, and the inexplicable letter of Mr. Wroughton's.

"Nothing's the matter," he said, sitting down close to Frank. "But please tell me just all you can. Did you ask her why she wanted to know?"

"Not I. It was perfectly clear that somebody had been gently hinting things about you. But I told her a good deal."

Frank's face grew quite gentle and affectionate.

"I told her you were the best chap in the world," he said. "That's about what it came to. I think I made her believe it too."

Then hurrying away from anything approaching to sentiment,

"Of course we have to lie on behalf of a friend," he said briskly. "I daresay she wanted to be sure she could trust herself in your studio without a chaperone."

Charles did not smile at this.

"But you think some one has been telling damned lies about me?" he asked.

"Probably. Why not? And what does it matter? Don't be upset, Charles. I wish I hadn't told you. At least I don't think I do. It may convince you that there's somebody in the world not set to a hymn-tune. Now do dress, and you will then come and lunch with me in my flat, and you may be able to hear Craddock walking about overhead. That'll make you happy, and you can get a step-ladder and kiss the ceiling!"

But there was another idea now that had to be put in the shadow of Charles' mind. It was far uglier than the first and had to be poked away in the darkest of recesses.

As soon as money had begun at all to flow his way last autumn, Charles had hounded his mother (as she put it) out of her disgusting rooms (so he put it) in Sidney Street, and had established her modestly indeed but comfortably in Grieve's Crescent not far from his new studio. To-night he was going to dine at home, and he looked forward to the serenity that always seemed as much a part of her as her hands or her hair, as a man after a hot and dusty day may look forward to a cool bath. Pictures that were candidates for the Academy had to be sent in before the end of this week, and he had spent an industrious afternoon working steadily at the background and accessories in his portrait of Frank. Craddock had advised him to send this, and the portraits of his mother and Mrs. Fortescue to the august tribunal, and had promised to speak helpful words, if such were necessary, in authoritative ears. But to-day the joy of painting had wholly deserted him, and as he worked, his conscious mind occupied with light and shadow, his unconscious mind had done a great deal of meditation, and the disagreeable objects he had so loyally stuffed away in the dark, seemed gambolling there like cats, active and alert. Every now and then one or other seemed to leap out of the shadow and confront him, and with Frank's face always before him on the canvas, they seemed in some nightmare sort of fashion to be using their mask of paint to communicate with him. It was as if Frank knew all that Charles had been so careful not to tell him ... it was as if he said "Oh, he warned you against me, did he? That was so like him." Worse still Frank seemed to say, "And he's warned other people against you. That's why you weren't welcome at the Mill House. He wanted to cut you off from the Wroughtons. I wonder why: what motive can he have had?... Look for a bad one. Let me see, wasn't there a girl? Why, yes, I bet she is the girl among the forget-me-nots. What a liar you are, Charles! You always said it was a picture out of your head. Are you a rival, do you think?"

All afternoon this sort of vague unspoken monologue rang in his ears. Again and again he pulled himself up, knowing that these were conversations internal to himself, not to be indulged in, but the moment his conscious and superficial mind was occupied again with his craft they began again.

There were other voices mixed with them ... he almost heard Lady Crowborough say "five thousand pounds for a lick of paint." He almost heard Reggie say "drew a cheque for ten thousand and one hundred pounds."... And again he pulled himself up, he felt that he would be suspecting his mother next for overcharging him for board and lodging. It was all Frank's fault, with his cynical false views about the rottenness of mankind.

For once Charles felt glad that the light was beginning to fail, and that he could honestly abandon work. But before he left his studio he turned Joyce's picture round to the light, and stood looking at it for a moment.

"I can't and won't believe it," he said.

There was still an hour to spare before he need go home to dinner, and he bustled out for a walk in the Park in the fading day. Spring was languorous in the air, but triumphantly victorious in the spaces of grass, where she marched with daffodils and crocuses for the banner of her advancing vanguard. The squibs of green leaves had burst from their red sheaths on the limes, and planes were putting forth tentative and angled hands, as if groping and feeling their way, still drowsy from the winter's slumber, into the air, under the provocation of the compelling month. All this did Charles good: he liked the sense of the silent plants, all expanding according to their own law, minding their own business which was just to grow and blossom, and not warning each other of the untrustworthiness of their neighbours. Frank ought to be planted out here, with a gag in his clever mouth, and an archangel or two to inject into his acidulated veins the milk of human kindness.... Charles smiled at the idea: he would make a cartoon of it on a postcard and send it to him.

And then suddenly his heart hammered and stood still, and out of his brain were driven all the thoughts and suspicions that he had been stifling all day. Frank and his cynicism, Craddock and his clung-to kindnesses, his art, his mother, his dreams and deeds were all blown from him as the awakening of an untamed wind by night blows from a sultry sky the sullen and low-hung clouds, leaving the ray of stars celestial to make the darkness bright and holy again, and down the broad path towards him came Joyce. Until she had got quite close to him she did not see him, but then she stopped suddenly, and suddenly and sweetly he saw the unmanageable colour rise in her face and knew that in his own the secret signal answered hers.

"Oh, Mr. Lathom," she said, "is it you? Grandmamma telegraphed for me to come up this morning: I am here for a night."

"Not ill, I hope?" said Charles.

Joyce laughed.

"No, I am glad to say. She was not in when I got to her house, and I had to come out.... Spring, you know."

Their eyes met in a long glance, and Charles drew a long breath.

"I discovered it ten minutes ago," he said. "Spring, just Spring: month of April."

For another long moment they stood there, face to face, spring round them and below and above them, and in them. Then Joyce pointed to the grass.

"Oh, the fullest wood!" she said. "I don't know why Grannie sent for me. I must be getting back. I am late already: is there a taxi, do you think?"

Charles' ill-luck prevailed: there was, and he put her into it, and stood there looking after its retreat. As it turned the corner not fifty yards away out of the Park most distinctly did he see Joyce lean forward and look out.... And though not one atom of his ill-defined troubles or suspicions was relieved, he walked on air all the way home instead of wading through some foul resistant stickiness of mud.... The great star, the only star that really mattered, had shone on him again, not averting its light.

But though he walked on air, the mud was still there.

"A visitor to tea, Charles. I wish you had been home earlier. Three guesses."

"Mother lies," remarked Reggie. "You do—you enjoyed being asked those things. That would never have happened if Charles had been at home."

This was rather like the uncomfortable though not uncommon phenomenon of feeling that the scene now being enacted had taken place before. Charles experienced this vividly at the moment.

"My first guess and last is Lady Crowborough," he said. "Right, I fancy."

"Near enough," said Reggie. "And her questions?"

Charles felt himself descend into the mud again. It closed stiffly about him, and he thrust something back into the darkness of his mind.

"Perfectly simple," he said. "She wanted to know exactly all about me, as if—as if she was going

to engage me as a servant, and was making enquiries into my character."

"Very clever. How was it done?" asked Reggie.

"Never mind. It is done, isn't it, mother?"

"Yes, dear, but how did you know?"

"It had to be so, that is all. Oh, I've had a tiresome day all but about half a minute of it. And my portraits have to go in before the end of the week, and they will all be rejected."

"Dear, there's not much conviction in your voice," observed Mrs. Lathom. "Aren't you being Uriah-ish, as Mr. Armstrong says?"

"Probably. But Frank was sitting to me this morning, and his tirades put me out of joint. The worst of it is ..."

He had stuck fast again in the slough, and again things with dreadful faces and evil communications on tongue-tip looked at him from the darkness. The sight of Reggie also had given birth to others: there they stood in a dim and lengthening line, waiting for his nod to come out into the open.

"You may as well let us know the worst," said Reggie encouragingly. "I can't bear the suspense. What is it Akroyd says: 'It—it kills me.' That's over the fourth turning. Much the funniest. What did Frank tirade about, Charles? I wish I had been there. I love hearing his warnings about the whole human race. It makes me wonder, when I can't account for a sixpence, whether you haven't taken it out of my trousers pockets while I was asleep."

"I suppose that's the sort of thing you really enjoy thinking about," said Charles savagely.

"Yes: it's so interesting. Sometimes I think you are rather bad for Frank. He said to me the other day 'You can always trust Charles.' I asked him if he didn't feel well. It wasn't like him."

Mrs. Lathom got up. It was perfectly evident that something worried Charles, and it was possible he might like to talk alone either with Reggie or her. If she took herself upstairs, Charles could join her, and leave his brother, or wait with him here, if he was to be the chosen depository.

"Don't be too long, boys," she said, going out.

Charles did not at once show any sign of the desire to consult, and Reggie, who had left Thistleton's Gallery in the winter, and obtained a clerkship in a broker's office in the city, politely recounted a witticism or two from the Stock Exchange, with a view to reconciling his brother to the human race. They fell completely flat, and Charles sat frowning and silent, blowing ragged rings of smoke.

At length he got up.

"Reggie, I've been worried all day," he said, "and seeing you has put another worry into my mind."

Reggie linked his arm in his brother's.

"I'm so sorry, Charles," he said, "and I've been babbling goatishly on. Why didn't you stop me? Nothing I've done to worry you, I hope?"

Reggie went anxiously over in his mind a variety of small adventurous affairs ... but there was nothing that should cause the eclipse of his brother's spirits.

"No, it doesn't concern you in any way, except as regards your memory. If you aren't perfectly certain about a couple of points I want to ask you, say so."

"Well?"

"The first is this. Do you remember last June an American called Ward drawing a cheque at your desk at Thistleton's? I want you to tell me all that you remember about it."

Reggie leaned his arm on the chimneypiece.

"Ward and Craddock came out together," he said after a pause. "Ward asked for my pen and drew a cheque for five thousand pounds, post-dating it by a day or two. I'm not sure how long ___"

"It doesn't matter," said Charles. "The cheque——"

"The cheque was for some Dutch picture he had bought. There was a Van der Weyde, I think——"

"But Dutch pictures? You never told me that. Are you sure?"

"Quite. Is that all? And what's wrong?"

Charles was silent a moment. One of the figures in the shadow leapt out of it, and seemed to nod recognition at him.

"No, there's one thing more. Didn't the same sort of affair happen again?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, much later: I should say in October. Ward did exactly the same thing, drew another cheque out at my desk, I mean, for rather an odd sum. What was it? Ten thousand, ten thousand and something—ten thousand one hundred I think. He drew it to Craddock as before. Yes, I'm sure it was for that. But how does it all concern you? Or why does it worry you? May I know, Charles?"

Charles wondered whether his horrible inference was somehow quite unsound, whether to

another his interpretation would seem ingenious indeed, but laughably fantastic. He felt he knew what Frank would make of it, but to Reggie the whole affair might seem of purely imaginary texture.

"Yes, I'll tell you," he said. "And I can't say how I long to find that you think I am suspicious and devilishly-minded. The facts are these. Craddock paid Mr. Wroughton five thousand pounds for his Reynolds, giving him a cheque of Ward's who purchased it. But you tell me this cheque was for Dutch pictures. The picture did not go to him till much later, I don't know when. And Craddock gave me fifty pounds for copying it. Do you see? What if—if Ward gave Craddock a cheque for ten thousand pounds for the picture with a hundred for me for the copy? Now, am I worse than Frank, more suspicious, more—more awful?"

Reggie was staring at him with wide-open eyes and shook his head.

"No," he said. "It sounds, it sounds—but surely it's impossible."

"Oh, I'm tired of saying that to myself. By the way, don't say a word to anyone. There are other things too. Oh, Reggie, can't you think of any explanation that is at all reasonable?"

Again Reggie shook his head.

"No," he said. "The first cheque was for some Dutch pictures."

"Well, let's go upstairs," said the other.

Later in the evening when Mrs. Lathom went to bed, Charles followed her up to her room, and sat down in front of her fire while she brushed her hair. It was not rarely that he did this and these minutes were to him a sort of confessional. Generally, the confession was a mere babble of happy talk, concerning his pictures, and his projects, but to-night he sat silent until the hair-brushing was nearly over. Then he spoke.

"Mother, darling," he said, "I saw Miss Joyce this evening, and—and she was jolly and friendly and natural. It lifted me up out of—what is it—out of the mire and clay. But I've gone back again, oh, much deeper. I want your advice."

She instantly got up, and came across to him. He put her in his chair, and sat down on the rug by her, leaning against her knees.

"Ah, I'm so glad, my darling," she said, "that you want to tell me what's wrong. These are my jewels."

"I can't tell you explicitly what is wrong. But I suspect someone whom I have always trusted immensely. Who has been very good to me, of—of swindling, and perhaps worse. What am I to do?"

She stroked his hair.

"Oh, my dear, if it is only suspicion dismiss it all from your mind or make a certainty of it one way or the other."

"But how?"

"I can't be sure without knowing the facts. But if your suspicion is reasonable, if, I mean, you can see no other explanation except the bad one, go as soon as you can to anyone who can give you certain information. But if there's a loophole for doubt——"

"I don't see that there is," said Charles quickly.

"Then make certain somehow and quickly," she said. "Not in a hurry, of course, for you must not act foolishly, but as soon as you can with wisdom. Oh, Charles, we can none of us risk keeping suspicion in our minds! There is nothing so poisoning to oneself. It—it shuts the wisdom of your soul: it turns everything sour; it spreads like some dreadful contagion, and infects all within us, so that there is no health left, or sense of beauty, or serenity. It is like walking in a cloud of flies. But, my dear, unless your suspicion is—is terribly well founded, don't give it another thought, if you can possibly avoid it. Be very certain that you can't explain things away otherwise."

Charles turned a shining face to her, shining for her through all his trouble.

"Thanks, mother darling," he said. "It really is a beastly position. And I'm such a coward."

"So are we all, dear," she said. "But most of us don't turn back really. Perhaps we aren't such cowards as we think. It is so easy to make the worst of oneself."

Charles got up.

"Yes, but I'm pretty bad," he said.

"I know, dear. You are a continual sorrow and trouble to me. Ah, bless you! And you saw Joyce. That's something, isn't it?"

"Well, a good deal," said he. "Good-night. I must get back home."

Charles had labelled himself coward, and indeed, as in the manner of youth, whose function so clearly in this life is to enjoy, he shrank from pain instinctively, not seeing beyond the present discomfort, but living in the moment. Yet it was not his bravery that was here attacked: it was at his trust that the blow at which he cowered was aimed, at the confidence in his fellows which was so natural to him. As he lay tossing and turning that night, he could not imagine himself taking the only step that seemed to be able to decide his suspicions, which was to go to Craddock himself with the whole history of them. There was just one other chance, namely, that Lady

Crowborough's purpose in making these inexplicable enquiries about him might declare itself. That in a manner ruthlessly convincing would settle everything, if her purpose was that which he could not but surmise. And at the thought he felt his face burn with a flame of anger, at the possibility of so monstrous an explanation. Yet all this agitating thought was just the secret nurture and suckling of suspicion against which his mother had warned him. How right she was: how the poison encroached and spread!

Frank turned up early next morning for his final sitting, with an evil eye and a brisk demeanour.

"A plan at last," he announced, "a real plan, and a good plot for a play. It's all quite serious, and I'm going to do it. It's taken me five months to puzzle it out, and last night it all burst upon me. New play of mine, which I shall begin working at immediately. I'm stale over the other, and this will be a change. I daresay Craddock will like it so much that he will ask me to put the other aside a bit. You see it's about Craddock. He's an egotist, you see: he will like that."

Charles was touched on the raw.

"Oh, do leave him alone, Frank," he said with a sudden appeal, as it were, to his own vanished confidence. "We disagree about him, you know, as we settled yesterday. It isn't really very nice of you to abuse a man who's a friend of mine."

"Nor is it nice of you to stick up for an enemy of mine," remarked Frank. "You should respect my dislike just as much as I should respect your affection. As you never do, I shall proceed."

Charles packed himself on his painting-stool. He could at least try to absorb himself in his work, for the sake of stifling his own thoughts even more than for distracting them from what Frank said.

"Rumple your hair," he said, "and stop still."

"I'm going to submit the scenario to Craddock this evening if I can see him," he said, obligingly rubbing up his hair. "Golly, it's a good plot. I've really only thought out the first two acts, but that will be enough for him to judge by. It's called 'The Middleman.' There's a lot in a title."

Charles sighed.

"You needn't groan," he said. "I can tell it you. He's a great big fat chap, popular and wealthy and hearty, engaged to a delightful girl. Then it comes out that he sweats young men of genius, you and me, of course, takes them up when they are unknown, and gets options on their future works. Isn't that it?"

"Where's the plot then?' You don't see the hang of it. One of those young men of genius, that's me, goes to him in the play with a play of which what you have just said is the sketch—Hamlet's not in it any more—and says, 'Now let me out of these options of yours, or I shall write a play like that.' And then it will faintly dawn on Craddock that the play is really happening to him and that in real life, that I shall do exactly what the young man of genius says he will do. Do you see? Simultaneously another of the young men of genius, that's you—you can be in love with 'The Middleman's' girl, says 'I'm going to paint a portrait called the Middleman, a great big fat chap, with gold dust on his coat collar. There's a play called the Middleman coming out at the same time: you may have heard of it. Now will you let me out of your options?' The Middleman in a burst of righteous indignation exclaims 'This is a conspiracy.' And they both say 'It is a conspiracy. What then?' He's in rather a hole, isn't he?"

Charles did not answer.

"You're an ungrateful dog, Charles," said Frank, "it gets you out of your options too. That shall be part of my bargain. I really am going to Craddock with that scenario. There's no third act, it is true, but he will give me credit for thinking of something spicy. Tranby would take that sort of play like a shot. Craddock has 'done' me. Why shouldn't I 'do' him? Do those whom you've been done by. A very Christian sentiment, and an application of abstract justice."

Charles put down his palette and got off his stool. There was a Frank-ish, a fiendish ingenuity about this, which, in ordinary mental weather, so to speak, with a gleam of sun on his own part to give sparkle to the east wind of it, could not have failed to make brisk talking. But to-day with his nightmare of doubt swarming bat-like round him, he found no humour but only horror in it.

"Sometimes I hardly think you're human, Frank," he said. "If you really believe Craddock is a swindler, how can you make jokes about it? If it was true, it would be too terrible to speak of. But you believe it is true, and yet you dwell on it, and gloat on it. I think you're a sort of devil, rubbing your hands when you see poor souls damning themselves."

"Hullo!" said Frank, rather startled by this.

"It's no good saying 'hullo.' It isn't news to you," said Charles, standing in front of the fire, flushed and troubled and looking younger than ever. "I've often told you I hate your attitude towards Craddock. It hurts me to hear a jolly good friend of mine abused, and you're continually doing it."

It would have required a prodigiously dull fellow not to see that there was something serious at the bottom of this. For all Frank's cynicism, for all the armoured hardness with which he met the world, there was just one person for whom he felt an affection, a protective tenderness that he was half-ashamed of, and yet cherished and valued more than any of the other tinned foods, so to speak, in his spiritual larder. It had fragrance, the freshness of dew on it.... He got up, and put his hands on Charles' shoulders.

"Charles, old chap," he said. "You never told me in that voice, you know."

Charles shook his head.

"I know I didn't," he said. "I never felt it in—in that voice before. But I do now. I can't bear the thought of anybody I know cheating and swindling and lying. Suppose I found out that you had been cheating me, or blackguarding me, should I be able to laugh about it, do you think, or sketch out a damned little play to read to you, which would show you up?"

"Yes, but you always say that Craddock's been so good to you," said Frank. "Till now, you have always half laughed at me when I slanged him. And who has been blackguarding you, I should like to know? What does that mean? Or ... or are you referring to what Lady Crowborough asked me? I talked some rot about the explanation being that some one had been abusing you."

Charles grasped at this rather appealingly.

"Yes, it was rot, wasn't it, Frank?" he said.

"Of course it was. Charles, I never dreamed it would stick in your mind like this—but what has that got to do with Craddock and his nimble option?"

Charles interrupted clamourously.

"Nothing, nothing at all!" he said. "I've got the blues, the hump, the black cat, what you please. Now be a good chap, and don't think any more about it. I want to finish your hair. It won't take long."

The interrupted sitting had not been in progress many minutes before the telephone-bell stung the silence, and Charles went to it where it hung in a corner of the studio. A very few words appeased that black round open mouth and Charles put back the receiver. Frank noticed that his hands were a little unsteady.

"Craddock's coming down here almost immediately, Frank," he said. "He's bringing a man called Ward with him, for whom I copied Wroughton's Reynolds."

"Customer, I hope," said Frank. "What do you want me to do, Charles?"

Charles flared out at this with the uncontrolled irritability of his jangled nerves.

"Stop here, and behave like a gentleman, I hope," he said. If any other man in the world had said that he would assuredly have found the most convenient hard object in full flight for his head.

"All right, old boy," said Frank.

Craddock arrived not a quarter of an hour later, with Mr. Ward. He was in the height of cheerful spirits, having, only an hour before, disposed of his entire lunatic asylum of post-Impressionist pictures to a friend of Ward's whose ambition it was to spend as much as possible over the embellishment, in a manner totally unprecedented and unique, of his house in New York. The dining-room was called the Inferno; it had black walls with a frieze of real skulls.... The floor of the drawing-room was on a steep slant, and all the tables and chairs had two short and two long legs in order to keep their occupants and appurtenances on the horizontal. It was for this room, brightly described to him by the owner, that the post-Impressionists were designed, and Craddock, in sympathy with his client's conviction that they were predestined for it, had put an enormous price on them, and the bargain had been instantly completed. After that he cheerfully gave up an hour to do Charles this good turn of taking Mr. Ward down to his studio, and on the way he found himself hoping that the picture of Mrs. Lathom had not yet gone in to the Academy. On the way, too, he gave the patron a short résumé.

"I think you never saw young Lathom when he was at your work on your Reynolds," he said. "You will find him a charming young fellow, and he, as soon as the Academy opens this year, will find himself famous. He will leap at one bound to the top of his profession. I strongly recommend you to get him to do a portrait of you now, in fact. His charge for a full length at present is only four hundred pounds. However, here we are, and you will judge for yourself on the value of his work."

Craddock made himself peculiarly amiable to Frank, while Ward looked at the portraits in the studio. Before the one of Charles' mother, he stopped a long time, regarding it steadily through his glasses. He was a spare middle-aged man, grey on the temples, rather hawk-like in face, with a low very pleasant voice. From it he looked at Charles and back again.

"You may be proud to have your mother's blood in you, Mr. Lathom," he said, "and I daresay she's not ashamed of you. I wish I'd got you to copy some more pictures for me at a hundred pounds apiece."

Craddock had given up wasting amiability on that desert of a playwright, and was standing close to the other two. Quite involuntarily Charles glanced at him, and he had one moment's remote uneasiness ... he could not remember if he had given Charles a hundred pounds or not. But it really was of no importance. Should Charles say anything, what was easier than to look into so petty a mistake and rectify it? But Charles said nothing whatever.

Ward turned and saw Craddock close to him.

"I was saying to Mr. Lathom," he said, "that there were no more full length copies to be had for a

hundred pounds, any more than there are any more original Reynolds of that calibre to be had for what I gave for Mr. Wroughton's."

"What did you give?" asked Charles deliberately. He felt his heart beat in his throat as he waited for the answer.

"Well, don't you tell anyone, Mr. Lathom," he said, "but I got it for ten thousand pounds. But I've felt ever since as if I had been robbing Mr. Wroughton."

This time Charles did not look at Mr. Craddock at all.

"Yes, I suppose that's cheap," he said, "considering what an enormous price a fine Reynolds fetches."

"Yes: now I suppose, Mr. Lathom, that portrait of your mother is not for sale. I am building, I may tell you, a sort of annex, or Luxembourg, to my picture gallery at Berta, entirely for modern artists. I should like to see that there: I should indeed."

Charles smiled.

"You must talk over that with Mr. Craddock," he said. "It belongs to him."

"You may be sure I will. And now I should be very grateful to you if you could find time and would consent to record—" Mr. Ward had a certain native redundancy—"to record at full length your impression of my blameless but uninteresting person. Your price, our friend tells me, is four hundred pounds, and I shall think I am making a very good bargain if you will execute your part of the contract."

Charles saw Craddock, from where he stood, just behind Mr. Ward, give him an almost imperceptible nod, to confirm this valuation. If he had not seen that it is very likely that he would have accepted this offer without correction. As it was that signal revolted him. It put him into partnership with ... with the man in whose studio he now stood. Now and for all future time there could be nothing either secret or manifest between them.

"You have made a mistake about the price," he said to Ward. "I only charge two hundred for a portrait. I shall be delighted to paint you for that."

From a little way off he heard Frank make the noise which is written "Tut," and he saw a puzzled look cross Craddock's face, who just shrugged his shoulders, and turned on his heel.

"I am very busy for the rest of this week," said Charles, "but after that I shall be free."

He glanced at Craddock, who had moved away, and was looking at the portrait of Mrs. Fortescue.

"I am changing my studio," said Charles in a low voice. "I will send you my new address."

Craddock did not hear this, but Frank did. It seemed to him, with his quick wits, to supply a key to certain things Charles had said that morning. He felt no doubt of it.

Mr. Ward involved himself in a somewhat flowery speech of *congé*.

"Next week will suit me admirably," he said, "and I shall think it an honour to sit to you. The only thing that does not quite satisfy me is the question of price. You must allow me at some future time to refer to that again. The picture I may tell you is designed to be a birthday present for Mrs. Ward, and though the intrinsic merit of the picture, I am sure, will be such that the donor—" he became aware that he could never get out of this labyrinth, and so burst, so to speak, through the hedge—"well, we must talk about it. And now I see I have already interrupted a sitting, and will interrupt no longer. Mr. Craddock, I shall take you away to have some conversation in our taxi about that picture of Mr. Lathom's mother."

Charles saw them to the door, and came back to Frank.

"I suppose you guess," he said. "Well, you've guessed right."

He threw himself into a chair.

"He has swindled Mr. Wroughton," he said. "He has swindled me, me, of a paltry wretched fifty pounds, which is worse, meaner than the other."

"And Mr. Wroughton?" asked Frank.

"He gave him five thousand for the Reynolds, receiving ten. That's not so despicable: there's some point in that. But to save fifty pounds, when he was giving me this studio, getting me commissions, doing everything for me! There's that damned telephone: see who it is, will you?"

Frank went to the instrument.

"Lady Crowborough," he said. "She wants to see you particularly, very particularly. Can you go to her house at three?"

"Yes," said Charles.

He got up from his chair, white and shaking.

"There may be something worse, Frank," he said. "She may have something to tell, much worse than this. Good God, I wish I had never seen him."

Frank came back across the studio to Charles.

"Charles, old chap," he said, "I've often told you there are swindlers in the world, and you've run up against one. Well, face it, don't wail."

Charles turned a piteous boyish face to him.

"But it hurts!" he said.

He paused a moment

"My father killed himself," he said, "because he had gambled everything away, and none of us knew, nor suspected. That's where it hurts, Frank. It's not anything like that, of course, but somehow it's the old place."

"We've all got an old place," said Frank. "Wounds? Good Lord, I could be a gaping mass of wounds if I sat down and encouraged myself. Buck up! And if you find there's anything to be done, or talked about, well, ring me up, won't you? Now, you're not going to sit here and mope. You are coming straight off with me to have lunch. There's nothing like food and drink when one is thoroughly upset. And afterwards I shall leave you at the house of that very mature siren."

Suddenly it occurred to Charles that Joyce was staying with her, or at any rate had done so last night. Till then his first outpouring of amazed disgust had caused him to forget that.... And it is a fact that he ate a very creditable lunch indeed.

CHAPTER IX.

Lady Crowborough, as has been incidentally mentioned, was in the habit of hermetically sealing herself up in a small dark house in Half Moon Street for the winter months. This year as recounted, she had substituted a process of whole-hearted unsealedness in Egypt for a couple of months, but on her return had been more rigorously immured than ever, to counteract, it must be supposed, the possibly deleterious effects of so persistent an exposure to the air, and to fortify her for her coming visits to Charles' studio. In the evening, it is true, she often went out to dine, in a small brougham with the windows up, but except for her call yesterday on Charles' mother, the daylight of Piccadilly had scarcely beheld her since her return. Windows in the house were always kept tightly shut, except owing to the carelessness or approaching asphyxia of servants, rooms were ventilated by having their doors set ajar, so that the air of the passage came into them, and dry stalks of lavender were continually burned all over the house, so that it was impregnated with their fresh fragrance. She was a standing protest against those modern fads, so she labelled them, of sitting in a draught, and calling it hygiene, and certainly her procedure led to excellent results in her own case, for her health, always good, became exuberant when she had spent a week or two indoors, her natural vitality seemed accentuated, and she ate largely and injudiciously without the smallest ill-effects. Between meals, she worked at fine embroidery without spectacles, sitting very upright in a small straight-backed cane chair.

The house was tiny, and crammed from top to bottom with what she called "my rubbish," for, without collecting, she had an amazing knack of amassing things. Oil paintings, water-colour sketches, daguerrotypes, photographs, finely-shaded pencil drawings, samplers, trophies of arms, hung on the walls, and on chimney-pieces and tables and in cupboards and cabinets were legions of little interesting objects, Dresden figures, carved ivory chessmen, shells, silver boxes, commemorative mugs, pincushions, Indian filigree-work, bits of enamel, coins, coral, ebony elephants, all those innumerable trifles that in most houses get inexplicably lost. She had just cleared a shelf in a glass case by the fireplace in her minute drawing room, and was busy arranging the beads and doubtful scarabs of "me Egyptian campaign" in it when Charles entered. Upon which she dismissed from her shrewd and kindly old mind all concerns but his.

"Sit down, my dear," she said. "And light your cigarette. I saw your mother yesterday, as she may have told you. I'm coming to sit for you next week, and so please have the room well warmed, and not at all what these doctors call aired. Lord bless me, I had enough air in Egypt to last me for twenty years to come."

She indulged in these cheerful generalities until she saw that Charles was established. Then she broke them off completely.

"Now I sent for you because I wished to see you most particularly, Mr. Lathom," she said. "No, there's nobody here but me: I sent Joyce back to her father this morning, so if you think you're going to see her, you'll be disappointed. Now it's no use beating about the bush: there's something I've got to tell you, and here it comes. That Craddock—I call him that Craddock—told my son Philip that you were a disreputable young fellow, that's about what it comes to. I had it from Craddock's own lips that he did. Joyce knew from her father that somebody had done so, and guessed it was that Craddock. So I was as cool as a cucumber, and just said 'I'm sorry you had so bad a report to give my son of Mr. Lathom.' I said it so naturally that he never guessed I didn't know it was he. And there he was caught like a wasp in the marmalade. I wish he had been one. I'd have had the spoon over him in no time."

Charles sat quite still for a moment, and in that moment every feeling but one was expunged from his mind. There was left nothing but a still white anger that spread evenly and smoothly

over his heart and his brain. He had no longer any regret that Craddock had done this, the consciousness that he had sufficed to choke all other emotions. More superficially the ordinary mechanism of thought went on.

"I never believed a word of it, my dear," went on Lady Crowborough, "nor did Joyce. But it was my duty, for reasons which you can guess, to find out if it was true or not. Well, I got your mother's account of you yesterday, as she may have told you, and your friend Mr. Armstrong's account, as he also may have told you, and there were several others. So either all these people are liars or else that Craddock is. And there ain't a sane person in the land who could doubt which it was. And Joyce has gone back home to tell her father."

Charles got up, still very quietly.

"I want to know one thing," he said. "Why did Craddock do it?"

"Good Lord, my dear," said Lady Crowborough, "as if that wasn't plain. Why the man wanted to marry Joyce himself, and proposed to her, too. He guessed, and I don't suppose he guessed very wrong either, that there was somebody in his way. At least," she added with a sudden fit of caution, "it might have been that in his mind. For my part the less I know about Craddock's mind the better I shall sleep at night."

"And that was why Mr. Wroughton didn't want me down there last autumn?" he asked.

"Why, of course. He wanted Joyce to marry the man. But Joyce will have told him all about it by now, and spoiled his lunch, too, I hope. But if he don't ask you down for next Sunday, when I'm going there, too, I'll be dratted if I don't take you down in my own dress basket, and open it in the middle of the drawing room. That's what I'll do. But he'll ask you, don't fear. I sent him a bit of my mind this morning about believing what the rats in the main drain tell him. Yes, a bit of my mind. And if he ain't satisfied with that there's more to come."

Suddenly over the sea of white anger that filled Charles there hovered a rainbow....

"Lady Crowborough," he said flushing a little. "You told me that it was your duty to find out whether these lies were true or not, for reasons that I could guess. Did you—did you mean I could really guess them?"

"Yes, my dear, unless you're a blockhead. But it ain't for me to talk about that, and I ain't going to. Now what about this Craddock? He's got to eat those lies up without any more waste of time, and he's got to tell Philip they were lies. How can we make him do that?"

Charles looked at her a minute, considering.

"I can make him do that," he said.

"By punching of his head?" asked Lady Crowborough.

"No, by a very simple threat. You told me once you had seen the cheque that Mr. Ward paid for Mr. Wroughton's Reynolds, and that it was five thousand pounds. That is so, is it not?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Mr. Ward paid him ten thousand pounds for it," said Charles.

"Good Lord, my dear, do you mean that?" she asked.

"Mr. Ward told me this morning that he paid Craddock ten thousand for it," said Charles.

"And certainly he gave Philip Mr. Ward's cheque for five thousand," said Lady Crowborough, "for I saw it myself and thought 'What a sum for a picture of a young woman!' Well, he's brought a pretty peck of trouble on himself, and I ain't a bit sorry for him. But even that's not so bad as what he did to you, with those nasty mean lies, as he thought could never be caught hold of. And so you'll go to him now, will you, and tell him what you know, and threaten that we'll have the law on him as a common swindler? Is that it?"

"Something like that," said Charles, getting up. "I think I shall see Frank Armstrong first."

"Aye do, and take him with you. He looks a hard one," said Lady Crowborough vindictively. "I wish I could come, too, and tell him what I thought about it all. And he wouldn't forget that in a hurry my dear if there's a rough side to my tongue! And you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Of course."

Charles paused a moment. Then he bent down and kissed her hand.

"I can't thank you," he said. "You don't know what you've done for me. It's—it's beyond thanks, altogether beyond it."

She drew his brown head down to hers and kissed him soundly.

"Get along, my dear," she said, "or you'll be calling me an idiot next minute, and then I shall have to quarrel with you. Get along and have a talk with that Craddock, and mind you shut the door tight when you go out."

Charles came out into Half Moon Street and the pale sunshine of the spring afternoon, in a sort of black exaltation of the spirit. For the time all thought of Joyce, of the magical, the golden possibilities that this detected slander opened in front of him, was utterly obscured by his immediate errand, that hung between him and it like some impenetrable cloud which must first find its due discharge in outpoured storm before the "clear shining" could dawn on him. He felt void of all pity, void even of regret that the man whom he had so completely trusted, for whom he

had cherished so abounding a sense of gratitude, should have proved so sinister a rogue. What he should say, and on what lines this scorching interview would develop and fulfil itself, he had no sort of idea, nor to that did he give one moment's thought; he only looked forward with a savage glee to the fact that within a few minutes, if he was lucky enough to find Craddock in, he would be face to face with him. All his shrinking from the suspicions which he had so sincerely tried to keep at arm's length was gone, now that the suspicions had turned out to be true, and he only longed to fling the truth of them in the teeth of the man whose integrity, so short a while ago, he had rejoiced to champion. That integrity was blown into blackened fragments, and his belief in it seemed now as incredible to him as the happenings of some diseased dream, which to his awakened senses were a tissue of the wildest rubbish, a mere babble of unfounded incoherence. There could be no regret for the cessation of impressions so false and unreal...

He walked quickly along Piccadilly, with colour a little heightened, and a smile, vivid and genial, on his mouth. Every now and then his lips pursed themselves up for a bar or two of aimless whistling, and he swung a light-hearted stick as he went. The pavement was full of cheerful passengers, the roadway of briskly-moving vehicles, and all the stir of life seemed full of the promise of this exquisite springtime. Then in a flash all recognition of the lively world passed from his consciousness, and he saw only that black cloud of his own exalted indignation and blind anger, which so soon, so soon now was going to discharge itself in God knew what torrent and tempest. Or would it quietly dissolve and drain itself away? Would there be no explosion, no torrent of storm, only just little trickling sentences and denials no doubt, then more little trickling sentences until there was just silence and no denials at all? He did not know and certainly he did not care. The manner of the affair in no way occupied or interested him. And over his boiling indignation that he knew raged below, there stretched a crust, that just shook and trembled with the tumult within, but showed no sign of giving way. Every now and then he said softly to himself, "Something's got to happen: something's got to happen," as he whistled his tuneless phrase and swung his stick.

Frank, who occupied a flat immediately below Craddock's, was in, and Charles, brisk and gay of face, marched in upon him.

"I've seen Lady Crowborough," he said, "and now we will go to see Craddock. He's ... he's amazing. The worst that I suspected, which I didn't tell you, is all soberly true. He has lied about me, he told the Wroughtons that I was a disreputable sort of affair. He has lied, lied, to get me out of the way. Now he has got to eat his lies. Come on, come on, what are you waiting for?"

Frank sprang up.

"Tell me about it first," he said.

"Oh, not now. I'll tell you about it upstairs. By the way, you had some little scheme to get yourself and me out of his hands. We'll take that first: we'll lead up to the grand crash. More artistic, eh? Or shall we begin with the grand crash? I don't know. I don't care. Let's go upstairs anyhow and see what happens. Let Nature take her course. Let's have a touch of Nature. What is it I have got to do according to your plan? Oh, yes, just say I'll draw a portrait of the Middleman. Frank, why the devil am I not blazing with indignation, and chucking things about. You're a psychologist, aren't you? Tell me that. You study people and make them have adventures. I'm all for adventures. Come on, and let's see what happens. We've such a fine day, too."

Frank licked his lips.

"Gosh, I'm on in this piece," he said. "Now wait a minute. We'll take my little farce first, just a curtain-raiser. He's got an agreement of yours, I suppose, just as he's got one of mine, that gives him his options. We must get those out of him first of all. Then ... then we can proceed with unbiassed minds. Ha!"

Frank gave one mirthless crack of laughter.

"We'll get those first," he said, "and then start fair. Up we go."

Craddock was in, and the two were admitted. It appeared that he had been having a little nap, for even as they entered he struggled to a sitting position on his sofa.

"Sorry to disturb you," said Frank, "but I wanted to see you rather particularly. Charles also. So we came up together."

Frank took up his stand on the hearth rug, while Charles gracefully subsided into a long low arm-chair. Craddock looked from one to the other, not nervously, but with an air of slightly puzzled expectancy. There was something vaguely unusual about it all.

"I wanted to speak to you about a play," said Frank, "which, under certain circumstances, I shall assuredly write. Tranby would be sure to take it. I naturally want to know if it appeals to you."

Craddock stroked the right side of his face. It was smooth and plump.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I should be charmed to hear it, but as a matter of fact I have not very much time this afternoon. Perhaps if you left the scenario with me—"

"It's not written out," said Frank.

Craddock glanced at the clock.

"Ah, I see I have half an hour," he said.

"That ought to be sufficient. If not, perhaps you can postpone your next engagement. However, you will see, if you think it worth while. I propose to call my play 'The Middleman.'"

Craddock's hand, that was still up to his face, paused a moment. Then it began stroking again.

"Quite a good title," he said, with an absolutely impassive tone.

"I thought you would approve. Of course he is the hero—shall we say?—of the play. He's large and stout, I want you to picture him to yourself—and wealthy and cultivated, a great judge of pictures and the arts generally. He purchases options on the work of young and unknown men, that's how he gets his money, and makes devilish good bargains."

Craddock raised his eyebrows slightly, and turned to Charles.

"And what is your part in this conspiracy?" he said quietly. "It is a conspiracy, I suppose."

Charles crossed one leg over the other, and put his finger-tips together.

"Oh, yes, you may call it a conspiracy," he said. "We thought you would. You see, I'm going to paint a portrait of Frank's middleman. I know just what he looks like. I could draw him for you on a half-sheet, if you think it necessary. Then I shall send it to some gallery or other,—it will be very like—just about the time that Frank's play comes out. You might like to exercise your option over it. So I shall paint another one."

"Not in your present studio," said Craddock suddenly.

"Certainly not in my present studio. I shall never paint anything more in my present studio."

Craddock grasped the whole situation: indeed it did not require any very great acuteness to enable him to see exactly how he stood, and on the whole he felt up to dealing with it. For a moment there was dead silence, and Charles whistled a futile tuneless phrase.

"There are such things as libel actions," he said to Frank.

"For those who feel up to bringing them," said he.

Once again Craddock paused. He got up from his sofa, went to the window and came back again. He rather expected to surprise a consultation of eyes going on between the two young men. But there was nothing of the kind. Frank was regarding his own boots, Charles was staring vacantly and stupidly, smiling a little, straight in front of him. Craddock was by no means a coward, and he felt not the smallest fright or nervousness.

"If you think I should hesitate to bring a libel action against you," he said to Frank, "if you ever put on anything that could be construed as defamatory to my character, you are stupendously mistaken. I know quite well that you have always disliked me, me, who took you out of the gutter, and gave you a chance of making your talents known. But that is always the way. To befriend a certain type of man means to make an enemy. By all means proceed to write your play, and make it as scandalous and defamatory as you please. I shall make not the smallest protest against it, you can produce it as soon as you like. But mind you it will run for one night only, and you will then find yourself involved in a libel action that will beggar you. Incidentally, though I imagine that this will seem to you a comparatively light matter, you will find you have caused to be recorded against you the verdict not of a jury only but of every decent-minded man and woman in England."

Frank looked at him, and suppressed an obviously artificial yawn.

"Hear, hear!" he said.

"And about my portrait?" said Charles from the depth of his chair.

Craddock turned to him.

"All I have said to your friend regarding my line of conduct applies to you also," he said. "You may do any caricature of me you please, and the more you hold me up to ridicule, the sounder will my grounds for action be. But what applies to you only is this. I consider that your conduct is infinitely more treacherous than his. He at least has from the first almost been avowedly hostile to me. You have pretended that you were conscious of the gratitude you certainly owe me. You have made me think that I was befriending a young man who was fond of me, and appreciated my kindness to him. Armstrong at any rate has made no such nauseous pretence. How deeply I am hurt and wounded I do not care to tell you. But if it is, as I suppose it must be, a source of gratification to you to know that you have wounded me, you may rest thoroughly well satisfied with what you have done. I congratulate you on the result. I warned you months ago, about your choice of friends. The only possible excuse for you is that you have fallen under the influence of the man I cautioned you against."

Frank looked up from his boots to Charles.

"Did he caution you against me?" he asked. "You never told me that."

"No, Frank. I didn't want then to give you another cause for grievance. But he did warn me against you."

"You would have been wise to take my advice," said Craddock. "As it is, perhaps you will see the propriety of your vacating my studio as soon as is convenient to you. I should think that by to-morrow evening I might hope to find it at my disposal."

"Certainly," said Charles. "I daresay you will soon find some other promising student."

Craddock turned his back on Frank for a moment.

"I never should have thought this of you, Charles," he said. There was real sincerity in his reproach. Bitter as was the injury he had inflicted on the boy, he was very fond of him, and

valued the return of his affection. It might be objected that a man does not wilfully and cruelly injure one whom he is fond of. Such an objection is mistaken and ignorant. For herein lie three quarters of the tragic dealings of the world, namely, that day by day and all day long men strike and betray their friends. They do not wrong those who are indifferent to them: for where should be the motive of that?

"I should never have thought it of myself," said Charles, and his voice faltered on the words.

Craddock turned to Frank again.

"You have told me about your proposed play," he said, "which I imagine was the object of your coming here, and Charles has come about his portrait. I do not know that anything further detains either of you."

Frank could have applauded the quiet dramatic development of the scene. If he had come across it in a play, he would have watched it with the tensest diligence. And here it was all unplanned: the situation seemed to develop itself without any exterior assistance. Craddock, for instance, was taking exactly the line that the drama demanded, and it was quite certain that he had not rehearsed his part. He felt certain also that Charles would prove equally discerning.

"There is just one more thing," he said. "I require you to destroy, in my presence, the contract I signed giving you an option to purchase three more plays of mine. You have a similar one with regard to pictures by Charles. That must be destroyed also."

Craddock stared at him in amazement.

"And is there anything else you would like me to do for you?" he asked.

"No, that is all."

Craddock gave his usual sign of merriment, the laugh that chuckled in his throat, but did not reach outwards as far as his lips, which remained without a smile. It was something of a relief to find that this was the object of their outrageous threats, for he again felt himself quite competent to deal with it. It was not that he had actually feared anything else, but in spite of that he was glad to have the object of their threats avowed.

"You are most original conspirators," he said. "You threaten me first, and when you see that your threats do not disturb me in the slightest degree, you produce, somewhat as an anti-climax surely, the object which you hope to gain by your futile menaces. Go away and practise: that is what I recommend you to do. Get some small handbook about conspiracy and black-mail. You are ignorant of the very rudiments of it. As you have seen I snap my fingers at your threats, indeed, I am not sure whether it would not amuse me if you put them into execution. But to make your demands upon the top of so pathetic a failure is surely what you, Armstrong, would call a 'weak curtain.'"

"Certainly that would be a very weak curtain," said Frank, looking at his boots again.

There was no need for him to look at Charles: it was as certain as if they had gone over the scene till they knew it by heart that Charles would pick up his cue. But when Charles spoke Frank looked up at Craddock again. He wanted to see how he would take it.

Charles neither shifted his position nor cleared his throat.

"How much did Ward give you for Philip Wroughton's Reynolds?" he asked.

Frank watching Craddock's face saw only the very slightest change pass over it. But for the moment his eyes looked inwards, squinting a little.

"That I suppose is your business?" he observed.

"Yes, in a moment I will tell you how it is," said Charles. "But first I may say what I am going to tell you."

Still Craddock's face did not change.

"Do you mean by that what you have just asked me?"

"It is the same thing. It was not in order to get free of your options that I tell you this. That is a very minor concern. What matters is that you have swindled Mr. Wroughton. And it is my business, because the cheque that was paid you for the Reynolds included a certain sum for my copy of the picture. Of that you only gave me fifty pounds."

Then the change came. Craddock's face grew a shade whiter and his upper lip and forehead glistened. But in a moment he pulled himself together.

"Ah, so this is the real threat," he said. "We are going to have a weaker curtain than ever. I entirely decline to discuss my private affairs with you. Go and tell whom you please that I have swindled, to use your own word, my very good friend Philip Wroughton. Go down to Thorley and see how he will receive you and your news. Do you suppose he would listen to you? And do you suppose that I will do so any longer? Tell this story and any other you may have been concocting to the whole world, and at the proper time I will very effectually stop you. You and your friend seem to have so much money that libel actions are the only way in which you can get rid of it. But first tell Wroughton, whom I have swindled. The—the monstrous suggestion!"

For one moment his indignation flared up. The next he had mastered it again. But inflamed by this, or by some underlying emotion, he made an error, and allowed himself to say more, when he had (so rightly) intimated that enough had been said.

"It is lucky for me," he said, "with such fellows round me, that I was business-like in the matter. The cheque Ward drew me for five thousand pounds I passed straight on to my friend when the purchase was concluded, and have his receipt for it. And as for your miserable fifty pounds, you agreed, as you very well know, to make the copy for that sum. You were glad enough to get it, and your gratitude was quite pretty. And that is all I think. I have no more to say to either of you."

He got up and indicated the door. Neither Charles nor Frank moved. And then a second sign escaped him. His indicating hand dropped, and the one word he uttered to Charles stuck in his throat.

"Well?" he said.

"You have forgotten," said Charles, "that Ward gave you a cheque for five thousand pounds in payment for some Dutch pictures. There was a Van der Weyde among them. It was from Thistleton's Gallery, I may remind you."

"You are very copiously informed."

"Yes. You see my brother was your clerk there. He well remembers the purchase and the drawing of the cheque. That was in June. The cheque was post-dated by a few days."

Without doubt Craddock was listening now, though he had said he would listen no more. Frank watched him with the same hard devouring interest with which he would have watched a man pinioned and led out to the execution shed. Charles went on in a voice that sounded a little bored. It was as if he repeated some well known tiresome task he had learned.

"It was in October," he said, "that another cheque was drawn to you by Mr. Ward, under the same circumstances. He wrote it, that is to say, at Thistleton's Gallery, at my brother's desk. This time the cheque was larger, for it was of ten thousand and one hundred pounds. Reggie told me of it at the time. I did not connect it then with the Reynolds picture."

"Lies, a pack of lies," said Craddock under his breath, but still listening.

"No, not a pack of lies," said Charles. "You should not say that sort of thing. This morning I asked Mr. Ward how much he paid for the Reynolds. He told me not to tell anyone, but it is no news to you, and so I repeat it. He paid you ten thousand pounds. Also he said to me—you heard that—that he didn't suppose I would do many more copies for one hundred pounds each. I drew an inference. And the whole cheque is accounted for."

Suddenly Frank looked away from Craddock, and glanced at Charles, nodding.

"He's done," he said, as if some contest of boxing was in progress.

Frank was right. During the fall of these quiet words, Craddock had collapsed; there was no more fight left in him. He sat hunched up in his chair, a mere inert mass, with his eyes glazed and meaningless fixed on Charles, his mouth a little open and drooping. The shame of what he had done had, all these months, left no trace on him, but the shame of his detection was a vastly different matter. But he made one more protest, as forceless and unavailing as the last roll of a fish being pulled to land, dead-beat.

"Lies," he said just once, and was silent.

Charles got quickly out of his chair and stood up pointing at him. As yet he felt no spark of pity for him, for there was nothing to pity in a man who with his last effort reiterates the denial of his shame. And the tale of his indictment was not done yet. He spoke with raised voice, and vivid scorn.

"You should know a lie when you hear it better than that," he said. "Do I sound as if I was lying? Did you lie like that when you lied about me to Philip Wroughton last autumn? Not you: you let your damned poison just dribble from you. You just hinted that I was a disreputable fellow, not fit to associate with him and his. You said it with regret—oh, I can hear you do it—you felt you ought to tell him. Wasn't it like that? Go on, tell me whether what I am saying now is lies, too! You can't! You're done, as Frank said. There's a limit even to your power of falsehood. Now sit there and just think over what's best to be done. That's all; you know it all now."

No word came from Craddock. He had sunk a little more into himself, and his plump white hands hung ludicrously in front of him like the paws of a begging dog. A wisp of his long black hair that crossed the crown of his head had fallen forward and lay stuck to the moisture on his forehead. The two young men stood together away from him on the hearth-rug, looking at him, and a couple of minutes passed in absolute silence.

Then an impulse, not yet compassionate for this collapsed rogue, compassionate only for the collapse, came to Charles.

"You had better have a drink," he said, "it will do you good. Shall I get it for you?"

He received no answer, and went into the dining room next door. The table was already laid for dinner, and on the side-board stood syphon and spirit decanter. He poured out a stiff mixture and brought it back to him. And then as he held it out to him, and saw him take it in both his hands, that even together were scarcely steady enough to carry it to his mouth, pity awoke.

"I'm awfully sorry, you know, Mr. Craddock," he said. "I hate it all. It's a miserable business."

Craddock made no answer, but sip by sip he emptied the glass Charles had brought him. For a few minutes after that he sat with eyes shut, but he smoothed his fallen lock of hair into its place again.

"What do you mean to do, either of you?" he asked.

Charles nodded to Frank to speak.

"I don't know what Charles means to do," he said, "because we haven't talked it over. For myself, I mean to have back my contract with you, or to see it destroyed. When that is done, I shall have nothing more to ask from you."

He thought a moment.

"You mustn't do unfriendly things, you know," he said. "You mustn't systematically run down my work in your papers. That wouldn't be fair. I intend, I may tell you, to hold my tongue about you for the future. I shan't—I shan't even want to abuse you any more. As for what I have heard about you in this last hour, it is quite safe with me, unless you somehow or other provoke me to mention it. I just want my contract, and then I shall have done with you."

Craddock got up, and unlocked a pigeon-holed desk in the corner of the room. There were a quantity of papers in it. Of these he took out one from the pigeon-hole A, another from that of L. He glanced at these and handed one to each of the young men. Frank read carefully over what was written on his, and then folded it up, and put it in his pocket.

"Thank you, that is all," he said.

Charles stood with his contract in his hand, not glancing at it. Instead he looked at the large white-faced man in front of him.

"We have more to talk about," he said. "Shall we—wouldn't it be better if we got it over at once? If you wish I will come in later."

The uncontrolled irritability of nerves jangled and overstrung seized Craddock.

"For God's sake let us have finished with it now," he said, "unless you've got some fresh excitement to spring on me. What do you want me to do? And why does he wait there?" he said pointing to Frank.

Charles nodded to Frank.

"I'll go then," he said.

Charles' anger and hot indignation had burned itself out. Of it there was nothing left but ashes, grey feathery ashes, not smouldering even any longer. It was impossible to be angry with anything so abject as the man who sat inertly there. It was impossible to feel anything but regret that he sat convicted of such pitiful fraud and falsity. He saw only the wreck of a year's friendship, the stricken corpse of his own gratitude and loyalty. Here was the man who had first believed in and befriended him, and it was not in his nature to forget that. It had so long been to him an ever-present consciousness that it had become a permanent inmate of his mind, present to him in idle hours, but present most of all when he was at work, and thus wrought into the web of his life and his passion. In the extinction of his anger, this reasserted itself again, tarnished it might be, and stained, but existent. And with that awoke pity, sheer pity for the man who had made and marred it.

He waited till Frank had closed the door.

"It's wretched," he said, "absolutely wretched."

Even to Craddock in the shame of his detection, and in his miserable apprehension of what must yet follow, the ring of sincerity was apparent; it reached down to him in the inferno he had made for himself. And the pity was without patronage; it did not hurt.

"Thank you for that," he said. "Now tell me what you want done. Or perhaps you have done what you wanted already ..."

He broke off short and Charles waited. He guessed how terribly difficult any kind of speech must be.

"There is just one thing I should like to tell you," said Craddock at length. "I—I lied about you to Philip Wroughton, but my object was not to injure you. I didn't want to injure you. But I guessed that you were in love with Joyce. I guessed also that she—that she liked you. You stood in my way perhaps. My object was to reach her. That is all."

There was no justification attempted: it was a mere statement of fact. He paused a moment.

"But I was not sorry," he said, "even when I found that I had not advanced my own suit."

"I didn't seem to matter, I suppose," said Charles in a sudden flash.

"Exactly that," said Craddock. "But I ask your forgiveness. I always liked you."

Charles did not answer at once, because he did not know whether he forgave Craddock or not. Certainly he did not want to injure him, he felt he could go no further than that.

"I intend to forgive you," he said. "That will have to do ..."

Even as he spoke all the innate generosity of the boy surged up in rebellion at this shabby speech, and the shabbier hesitation of thought that had prompted it.

"No, that won't have to do," he said quickly. "I should be ashamed to let that do. Forgive you?"

Why yes, of course. And now for the rest. You owe Mr. Wroughton five thousand pounds. There is no reason, I suppose, why you should see him and explain? I take it that you will send him his money. Is that so?"

"That shall be done."

"Right. About me, what you said about me, I mean. You must write to him, I think. You must withdraw what you said. Perhaps you had better do that at once."

"Yes."

Charles got up.

"I will go then," he said. "My properties shall have left your studio by to-morrow evening. There is nothing more to settle, I think."

He held out his hand.

"Goodbye," he said. "I—I can't forget we have been friends and I don't want to. You have been awfully good to me in many ways. I always told Frank so. Goodbye."

Craddock was perfectly capable, indeed he had proved himself so, of the depths of meanness and falsity. But he was not in natural construction, like the villain of melodrama, who pursues his primrose path of nefarious dealing, calm and well-balanced, without one single decent impulse to clog his tripping feet. And when this boy, for whose gifts he had so profound an admiration, who knew the worst of him, could not forget as he said that they had been friends, he felt a pang of self-abasement that shot out beyond the mire and clay in which his feet were set.

"I wonder if you can possibly believe I am sorry," he said. "I know it is a good deal to expect.... If that is so, may I ask you, as a favour which I should so much appreciate, that you do not take your things away from my studio just yet anyhow? Won't you do that as a sign of your forgiveness? I won't come there, I won't bother you, or embarrass you with the sight of me. It isn't so very much to ask of you, Charles."

Charles had an instinctive repulsion from doing anything of the sort. He wanted to wash his hands clean of the man and of all that belonged to him, or could awaken remembrance of him. But, on the other hand, Craddock was so "down"; it was hardly possible to refuse so humble a petition. Besides he had said that he forgave him, and if that was not fully and unreservedly done, he might at least prop and solidify what he desired should be true in material and compassable ways. His mind needed but a moment to make itself up.

"But by all means, if you wish," he said. "I should be very glad to.... And perhaps soon, not just yet, but soon, you will come and see my work, if I ring you up? Do! Or when you feel you would like to see me again, you will tell me.... Goodbye."

Craddock heard him go downstairs, from Frank's door, and continue his journey. Not till then did he see that Charles had left on the edge of the chimneypiece the contract concerning options which he had given him back. For half-a-second the attitude of mind built and confirmed in him by the habit of years asserted itself, and he would have put it back into the dark from which he had taken it half an hour ago. But close on the heels of that came a more dominant impulse, and he tore it to bits, and threw the fragments into the fender.

Then he sat down at his table, drew out his cheque-book and wrote a cheque payable to Philip Wroughton for five thousand pounds. There was no difficulty about that; Mr. Ward's amazing friend who had carried off the complete nightmare decoration of post-Impressionists from the walls of Thistleton's Gallery had enabled his banking-balance to withstand an even larger call on its substantiality than that. But there was a letter to be written with it....

An hour later his servant came in to remind him that in half an hour he expected two friends to dinner. Already the waste-paper basket was choked with ineffectual beginnings, implying palliations, where no palliation was possible, telling half the truth and hinting at the rest, and still Craddock sat pen in hand, as far as ever from accomplishing this epistolary effort. And then an illuminating idea occurred to him: he would state just what had happened, neither more nor less, saying it in the simplest possible manner.... It took him a full half-hour always to dress for dinner, but he was ready to receive guests who were almost meticulously punctual, so short a time had his note taken him.

Philip Wroughton had become, so he often said to himself and Joyce, a perfectly different man, owing to his salutary wintering in Egypt, and in consequence (thinking himself, perhaps a different man than he really was) had just been knocked flat by an attack of lumbago, owing to a course of conduct that a few months ago he would have considered sheer insanity for one so physically handicapped as himself.

In consequence it was Joyce's mission to take his letters and morning-paper up to him, after breakfast, hear his account of himself, and any fresh comments on the origin of this painful attack which had occurred to him during the night, open his letters for him—there was seldom more than one—and entertain him with such news out of the paper as she thought would interest him. To-day the pain was a good deal better, and he had remembered a new and daring action of his own which quite accounted for his trouble.

"No doubt it was what I did on Thursday evening," he said, "for if you remember you called me to the window after dinner, saying what a beautiful night it was, and that the moon was full. I am not blaming you, my dear, I only blame myself for my imprudence, because if you remember I went out on the gravel path, in thin evening shoes, and dress-clothes, and stood there I daresay a

couple of minutes. I remember I felt a little chilly, and I took a glass of hot whiskey and water before I went to bed. I had already had a glass of port at dinner, which in the old days was sufficient to give me a couple of days of rheumatism, and the whiskey on the top was indeed enough to finish me off. Do you not think that it was that, Joyce? Sometimes I feel that you are not really interested in this sort of thing, which means just heaven or hell to me; I am sure if a mere look at the moon and a glass of whiskey and water, without sugar, put you on your back for three days in agony and sleeplessness, I should show a little more curiosity about it. But I suppose you are accustomed to my being ill; it seems the natural state of things to you, and I'm sure I don't wonder considering that for years that has been my normal condition. Well, well, open the paper and let us try to find there something which appeals to you more than your father's health; aviation in France, perhaps, or the floods in the Netherlands."

Poor Joyce had not at present had a chance of speaking.

"But I am interested, father," she said, "and it was rather rash of you to take port, and then a stroll at night and the whiskey. I don't know what Dr. Symonds will say to you if you tell him that particularly when you told him yesterday that it was the draught in church on Sunday."

"It all helps, Joyce," said her father, now contentedly embarked on the only interesting topic. "As Dr. Symonds himself said, these attacks are cumulative, all the little pieces of unwisdom of which one is guilty add to the pile, and at last Nature revenges herself. I wonder if coffee should go too: I should miss my cup of coffee after dinner. But I used to take it in Egypt without the slightest hint of ill-effects. Perhaps if I had saccharine instead of sugar.... I will ask Dr. Symonds. What letters are there for me?"

"Only one. I think it's from Mr. Craddock."

Philip Wroughton frowned.

"Really what you told me when you came down from town yesterday about his slandering that young Lathom," he said, "seems to be quite upsetting, if true, if true. Certainly it took away my appetite for lunch; at least if I had eaten my lunch I feel sure it would have disagreed and so, briefly, I left it. But on thinking it over, Joyce,—I thought a great deal about it last night, for I slept most indifferently—I do not see why we should let it influence our bearing to Craddock. After all, what has happened? He said that young Lathom was not a very nice young fellow, and my mother has heard from his mother and his great friend that he *is* a very nice young fellow. What would you expect his mother and his friend to say? It is Craddock's word against theirs. As for flying out, as you did, into a state of wild indignation against Craddock (it was that which upset me for my lunch, I feel convinced) that is quite ludicrous.... And your grandmother's letter to me, giving me what she called a piece of her mind, I can only—now I am better—regard as the ravings of a very old and lunatic person. And on the top of that tirade, saying that she wishes to come down here next week, and bring her precious young Lathom with her! Luckily this attack gives me ample excuse for putting off a proposed visit from anybody."

"You need only see them as much as you feel inclined," said Joyce.

"On the contrary," said Philip with some excitement, "when one is ill, and there are visitors in the house, one is always meeting them when one does not want to. As you know, I do not take my hot bath till the middle of the morning; I am sure to meet one or other of them in the passage. And my mother invariably uses up all the hot water in the boiler.... It would all be very inconvenient. Besides, as I say, it was all hearsay about young Lathom being not quite steady; it is equally hearsay that he is. He may be as steady as a rock or as unsteady as—as that steamer from Marseilles to Port Said for all I care."

"But you acted on the report of his unsteadiness," said Joyce, "in not letting him come down to see his copy of your Reynolds."

Philip put a fretful hand to his face and closed his eyes.

"You are very persistent and argumentative, Joyce," he said, "and you know I am not up to these discussions. And this morning only I was planning that as soon as I could move, we would go and spend a fortnight at Torquay: I see they have been having a great deal of sunlight there. Pray let us not continue. I think you said there was a letter from Craddock, to whom you never did justice. You disappointed me very much, and him too of course. Please take his letter and see what he has to say."

Joyce tore open the envelope and took out the contents.

"There seems to be a cheque enclosed," she said.

Philip raised himself in bed, and put out his hand. An unexpected cheque by post is a pleasant excitement to all but the most apathetic Croesus.

"Give it me," he said. "I wonder what that can be for." He glanced at it.

"Good God, how slow you are, Joyce," he exclaimed, "read his letter. I don't know what it means."

Joyce read.

"I enclose my cheque for five thousand pounds, which is the balance of what I actually received from Mr. Ward, for your Reynolds. With regard to your subsequent proceedings I throw myself unreservedly on your mercy. I have also to tell you that the statements I made to you about the character of Charles Lathom are entirely unfounded. I unreservedly withdraw them."

Philip made a quicker movement than he had done since 9.30 a.m. three mornings before, the same being the moment when the lumbago stabbed him.

"Five thousand pounds!" he exclaimed. "Why, the man's a thief! Joyce, five thousand pounds. A liar too! He acknowledges he told lies about that young Lathom. I've never had such a shock in my life. And the interest on all this money. Doesn't he owe me that as well? Is it that he means by throwing himself on my mercy? I am not sure that I am inclined to be merciful about that...."

Then he made an enormous concession.

"Joyce, we must certainly show young Lathom that—why, I am sitting quite upright in bed, and felt nothing when I moved—as I say young Lathom must certainly be told that he may come down to see his copy. It would not do to be less generous than Craddock about that. But I am very much shocked: I hardly know what to say. Anyhow I will have my bath at once. And you might look up the trains to Torquay, my dear. Your grandmother and young Lathom must come down after we get back. Really, even when I move, I feel no pain at all, only a little stiffness. They say a great shock sometimes produces miraculous results...."

Joyce never quite determined the nature of this shock: sometimes it seemed only reasonable to suppose it was the shock of joy at this unexpected and considerable sum of money, sometimes she construed it into a shock of horror at this self-revelation of their travelling companion. But certainly the lumbago ceased from troubling, and two days afterwards they started for Torquay.

CHAPTER X.

It was the day of the private view of the Academy; all morning and afternoon a continuous stream of public persons had been flowing in and out of the gates into Piccadilly and the mysterious folk who tell the press who was there, and how they were dressed, and to whom they were seen talking, must have had a busy day of it, for everybody was very nicely dressed, and was talking rather more excitedly than usual to everybody else. In fact there was hubbub of a quite exceptional kind, connected, for once in a way, with the objects which, nominally, brought these crowds together. The crowd in fact was not so much excited with itself (a habit universal in crowds) as with something else. Indeed the sight of Akroyd, who had just been knighted, talking to Tranby (who just hadn't) roused far less attention than usual, and all sorts of people whom he was accustomed to converse with on the day of the private view hurried by him as he stood in an advantageous position in front of an extremely royal canvas at the end of the third room, catalogue in hand, scrutinizing not him, but the numbers affixed to the pictures. For a little while he was inclined to consider that a tinge of jealousy, perhaps, or of natural diffidence, more probably, prompted these inexplicable slights, but before long he became aware that there was something in the air besides himself. Opportunely enough, Craddock made his appearance at the moment, and Sir James annexed him.

"Something up: something up, is there, Craddock?" he asked. "Yes: many thanks, my lady is very much pleased about it. But surely, there is an unusual animation—how de do?—an unusual animation about us all this morning. Is it a picture, or a potentate, or a ballerina? Ah, there is young Armstrong. Armstrong, I hope you will come to the hundredth night this evening. I shall say something about you at the call. No doubt your friends in front will demand you also."

Frank looked Craddock full in the face for a moment, and decided to recognize him.

"Hullo, Craddock," he said. "What'll you give me for my portrait, or don't you do business in these sacred halls? No, I'm afraid no amount of demand will produce me this evening, Akroyd. Goodbye: I'm going to stand by my portrait again: it's the biggest lark out. Charles is up on top, isn't he, Craddock?"

Charles certainly was up on top, for it was he, and he alone, who was causing all this crowd to forget itself, in its excitement about him and his work. He had risen, this new amazing star, on the artistic horizon, and all eyes were turned towards it. In vain, for the moment anyhow, had Mr. Hoskyns conceived and executed his last masterpiece "Angelic Songs are Welling," in which a glory of evening sunlight fell through a stained glass window onto the profiled head of a girl with her mouth open, sitting at an organ, while four stupefied persons gazed heavily at her, in a room consisting of marble and polished woodwork and mother of pearl. In vain were acres of heather and Highland cattle interspersed with birch trees and coffee-brown burns; in vain did the whole gamut of other portraits, from staid railway directors in frock coats, and maps spread on the table by them, down to frisky blue and white youngest daughters of Somebody Esquire, frown or smile or frolic on the walls. There were just three focusses of interest, one in the second room, one here among the masterpieces of the masters, a third in the room just beyond. Here was the portrait of "The Artist's Mother," in the room beyond Mrs. Fortescue gallantly maintained her place by the presentment of herself, and received congratulations; in the second room, Frank scowled and wrestled with his play. It was a Boom, in fact, everybody wanted to see Charles' pictures without delay, and having done so, told everybody else to go and do likewise.

Craddock had made what is known as a good recovery after the painful operation recorded in the last chapter. He had suffered, it is true, one relapse, when, on giving Lady Crowborough a choice of three nights on which to come to dine with him, he had received a third-person note regretting (without cause assigned) her inability to do so, but it soon became apparent to him that nobody, not even she, had any intention of making the facts of his operation known to the world. And with

his recovery there had come to him a certain shame at what he had done. True, that shame was inextricably mixed with another and less worthy kinsman, shame at his detection, but it was there, in its own right, though no doubt detection had been necessary to bring it forth. It had come, anyhow, cowering and crying into the world.

This morning, more especially, his shame grew and throve (even as his recovery grew) when he looked on those three superb canvases before which the whole world was agape. There was little under the sun that he revered, but his reverence was always ready to bow the knee before genius, and it seemed to him that of all the "low tricks" that his greed or his selfishness had ever prevailed upon him to accomplish, the lowest of all was when he let fall those little efficacious words about Charles. He had mocked and cheated the owner of the gift that compelled obeisance, the gift to which he, in all his tortuous spinnings, had never failed in homage. Surrounded as these three stars were now, with the smooth dark night, so to speak, of mere talent and more or less misplaced industry, it was easier to judge of their luminous shining, but he did not seek to excuse himself by any assurance of previous hesitation or doubt in his verdict of their quality. He had known from the first, when one summer morning close on a year ago he had stood by Thorley Weir that a star was rising.... He felt as if he had been picking Velasquez' pocket.

And yet the temptation at the time had been very acute. Just as there was no mistaking Charles' genius for any second rate quality, so there had been no mistake in his telling himself that he had been in love with Joyce, when he had succeeded, so easily and meanly, for the time, in removing from his path what undoubtedly stood materially in his way. He had cleared the path for himself, so he had hoped, but the path, when cleared, led, so far as he was concerned, nowhere at all, and he might just as well have left it cumbered to his passage and himself encumbered of his monstrous meanness. Joyce still stood impenetrably barred from him, no longer only by the barrier he so rightly had conjectured to be there, but by the fact of his own detection in its attempted removal. But he had accepted the second rejection of himself as final, and since his return from Egypt had forbade himself to dally with the subject of domestic happiness. Consolation of all sorts could be brought to play, like a hose, on a burning place; given time the most awkward wielder of it could not fail to quench the trouble, and—the house of life had many windows into which the sun shone, without risk of provoking internal conflagrations. Only, sometimes, his subtly-decorated and sumptuous flat seemed to him now a little lonely. There was no longer any thought of a girl's presence abiding there, turning it into that strange abode called home, and there came there no longer that eager and divinely-gifted boy, whose growth during this last year had been a thing to love and wonder at. He might have kept him: that at any rate had been in his power. Instead, he had grasped at a little more money, which he did not, except from habit, want, he had lied a little in the hope of entrapping that wild bird, love, and he had gained nothing whatever by it all. A certain morality, born perhaps of nothing higher than experience, had, in consequence, begun to make itself felt in him.

The crowd surged and thickened about him, and he found himself the bureau of a myriad of inquirers. All this last winter and spring London had vaguely heard of this amazing young genius who was going to burst on the world, and Craddock in this room, and Mrs. Fortescue, looking nearly as brilliant as her portrait, in the next, were seized on as fountains of original information. Elsewhere Lady Crowborough, in a large shady hat trimmed with rosebuds and daisies, could give news of her own portrait now approaching completion, and Mr. Ward, who had marked down half a dozen pictures as suitable for his New York Luxembourg, followed, faint but pursuing, wherever he could get news of Craddock having passed that way, to tempt him with fresh offers for the mother portrait. Round that the crowd was thickest, and there, those who could see it were silent. There were no epithets that seemed to be of any use in the presence of that noble simplicity and tenderness. Once in a shrill voice Mr. Ward exclaimed, "Well, he's honoured his mother anyhow!" but even that, though on the right lines, savoured of inadequacy, a fault to which she was mostly a stranger. Or, now and then, a critic would point out the wonderful modelling of the hand, or the high light on the typewriter, or even shrug a fastidious shoulder, and wonder whether the quality of the brush-work was such—But for the greater part, there was not much talking just in front of it. Somehow it lived: to criticise or appreciate was like making personal remarks to its face. It took hold of you: you did not want to talk.

Charles had not intended to appear on this day of private view, but considering how deep and true was the knowledge that his portrait showed of his mother, it was strange that it had not occurred to him that it was absolutely certain that she would insist on going herself and would not dream of considering any escort but his. She called for him in fact, at his studio about twelve, dressed and eager with anticipation, and Charles had the sense not to waste time in expostulation over so pre-ordained a fact, as he now perceived his visit to be, but accepted the inevitable and put on his best clothes, while his mother brushed his hat. It was thus about a quarter to one, when the galleries were most crowded and the ferment over the three portraits was at its highest, that they entered.

Probably until that moment there were scarce fifty people out of all the multitude who knew Charles by sight, scarce five who knew his mother. But even as they went their way up the steps

and met the opposing crowd of out-goers, she was aware of eager unusual glances directed at her, she heard little whispered conversations beginning "Why surely"—she knew that people stopped and looked after them as she passed, and all the exultant pride uprose triumphant, and laughing in the sheer joy of its happiness, even as when first she knew she had borne a child. Vague and wild were the conjectures at first, but every chattering group that passed them, recognising suddenly, confirmed it, and from conjecture she passed to knowledge. Why did they all stare at her with her quiet unremarkable face, who always passed about so private and unobserved, unless something had happened to make her thus suddenly recognised and stared at? She cared not at all for the little accesses of shyness and timidity that kept breaking over her, making her sweet pale face flush like a girl's, for all her conscious self was drowned and forgotten in her son, in him who in an hour had caused her face to be famous and familiar. And how she longed that no inkling of this might reach Charles, so that her triumph might be prolonged and magnified, how she encouraged him to consult his catalogue, and tell her who this picture and that was by, fixing his attention by all means in her power on anything rather than the crowds that more and more openly stared and whispered about her. Well she knew that if once he guessed the cause of the whispers and glances, a horror-stricken face and flying coat-tails would be the last she would see of him. For the recognition of her she saw, just led to the recognition of him, and with ears pricked and eager, she could catch the sequels—"That must be he ... What a handsome boy ... But surely he's so young...." It was sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.

They had passed in through the sculpture-gallery into the third room where, as she knew, her own portrait hung, and with infinite craft, prolonging the time, she had immediately caught sight of something on the opposite wall, that claimed her instant attention. From one picture she passed to another, and furtively saw how dense a crowd was congregated on the other side of the room, and knew what it was that so absorbed them. And Charles was getting interested now in showing her what he had seen on that his first historic varnishing day, and was eager with speech and pointed finger.

"Look at that Sargent," he said, "it makes you hate to look at that sunshine. How on earth does he do it? Isn't it magic? Just blue and yellow, same as we've all got in our paint-boxes. But he sees so splendidly! That's half the battle, seeing——"

This was capital: at this rate her triumph would last all up the long wall, round the top of the room, and nearly half way down the other. Alas, it was already nearly over.

Charles looked up and saw the mass of people round the place where undoubtedly his picture was.

"Let's go and look at you, mother," he said, "as you said you wanted to see it hanging. I say, what a lot of people there are. There's a gorgeous thing of Lavery's hanging next it: it was rather bad luck, that, on me, though it's a miracle getting on to that wall at all. Come across: we'll get that over, and then can enjoy the rest."

They crossed the room and wedged themselves into the inter-shouldered crowd. Very slowly indeed those in front of them cleared away, and at length they stood opposite it. Then as they looked, those round them recognizing her, and making the infallible guess at Charles' identity, stood a little back for them, and still a little more back. Charles, still childlikely unconscious, was intent on his picture's neighbours: his mother knew exactly what was happening, and despite herself felt a gathering dimness in her eyes. In all her tale of unselfish years she had never felt so big with personal pride, into which not one atom of self entered.

"Well, if you've *finished* looking at yourself, mother dear," said he in rather a high voice.

He turned and horror glazed his eyes. It was quite impossible to mistake what that half-circle of pleasant well-dressed folk were staring at, not the picture's neighbours, not his picture itself this moment.

"For heaven's sake, let's get out of this," he said, blushing furiously. And the knot of people round his picture turned, smiling and pleased at the boy's modesty, and the mother's superb pride.

Charles in his retreat, with his mother in his wake, ran straight into Craddock. This was no great embarrassment, for Craddock had been to the studio not long before: also his mother knew nothing, except that Charles a month ago had been greatly upset in connection with Craddock. She might have guessed more, but Charles had told her no word. And at the moment in his confusion, any known face was a harbour of refuge.

"Hullo, Mr. Craddock," he said, "my mother wanted to come and look at herself. So I brought her. Here she is. What a jolly show."

Craddock made his answer to Mrs. Lathom.

"Are you proud?" he said. "Are you more than proud, satisfied?"

She shook hands with him.

"I am even that," she said. "And what am I to do with this foolish boy?"

"Lead him about, show him to everybody: he has got to get used to it. I expected a great deal myself, but I have yet to get used to this."

Charles' eyes went back to the crowd in front of his picture again.

"What has happened?" he asked. "Is it—do you mean it's a huge success, huge, you know?"

"Walk up and down again with your mother, my dear fellow, and judge."

Charles became wild-eyed again.

"But it's a dream," he said. "It's—oh, Lady Crowborough."

Lady Crowborough was sufficiently moved to recognize Craddock.

"How de do, Mr. Craddock?" she said. "Well, Charles, my dear, you've gone and done it. There ain't an artist here but what's cursing you. There never was such a private view, and I've seen somewhere about eighty of them. Now, I'm going to have my lunch. There's nobody as can say a sensible word this morning all along of your pictures. And don't you forget to be at Paddington in good time to-morrow afternoon for the train down to Thorley. And if you get there before me, lay hold of an empty carriage and put the windows tight up."

Charles was instantly and completely diverted by this new topic.

"Oh, Mr. Wroughton does expect me?" he asked.

"Yes, he told me to tell you. And if you find you're enjoying yourself we'll stop over till Tuesday. I hate those Saturday to Monday things, running away again before you get your boxes unpacked. I daresay you'll find enough to amuse you till Tuesday. You can bring down your paint-box if you want something to occupy you, and make a drawing of me or my maid or Joyce or something."

And with a very broad grin on her face she moved away.

Frank descended next on them.

"Libel-action imminent, Charles," he said, looking firmly at Craddock (this he found inevitable). "I've been standing in front of my portrait for an hour, and listening. Two timid little people come up to it and say 'Good gracious, what a dreadful-looking young man. Who is it? Turn up a hundred and seventy-five, Jane.' 'Sunrise on the Alps! It can't be! Youngest daughter of Lady Jellicoe. No, a hundred and seventy-five! Oh, Mr. Frank Armstrong, is it? Fancy! And we liked "Easter Eggs" so much.' I'll have damages for that sort of thing. You've spoiled my public."

"Lord, if I had wished to libel you," said Charles, "I wouldn't have let you off like that."

"Your mother too," said Frank. "Why, it's the kid seething its mother in its own vitriol. I haven't seen it yet, I was too occupied. Libellous fellow! What does she say to it all?"

Mrs. Lathom turned to him.

"She doesn't say much, Mr. Frank," she said. "But—but she's having rather a happy morning."

"Well, then take me to have a look at you, and I'll take you to have a look at me. After that, Charles' brass band which I've ordered will be ready. 'See the conquering,' you know."

Charles lingered with Craddock.

"Now tell me really," he said, "without chaff I mean, like Lady Crowborough and Frank."

"They have told you really," he said. "If you want it in other words, say that your price for a full-length is a thousand pounds. That's practical, isn't it?"

Charles shook his head.

"But I still don't understand," he said.

Then all the boyish spirits surged high, high too surged all his true artistic ambitions and passions, rising to that splendid point of humility which must always accompany triumphant achievement and its recognition. The utter surprise and the shock of this last quarter of an hour which had unsteadied and bewildered him cleared away: what had happened began to be real.

"But what gorgeous fun!" he cried. "And how I must work. There's everything to learn yet."

Craddock wondered whether he would find at Thorley that which should be the centre and the sun of his waking. Almost he hoped that he would, for so radiant a completeness burned envy away, or at the most left a little negligible dross. Joyce a centre sun, loving and loved, and her lover this splendid star.... With that inspiring bliss what was there that this young hand and eager eye might not see and accomplish. The love of a son for his mother, the comradeship of a friend, the mere presence of a pretty woman, a brother's well-made limbs in act to spring, had been sufficient to bring forth the work of just one astounding year. What when the love-light of man and woman flashed back and forth between him and the exquisite girl down by the riverside? Might that not open a new chapter in the history and records of the beautiful? It did not seem to him an outrageous fantasy to imagine that the possibility was a real one.

It was seldom that those who were to travel with Lady Crowborough were privileged to reach the appointed station before her arrival; for no amount of contrary experience convinced her that trains were not capable of starting half an hour or so before their appointed times. Also she liked to get a carriage to herself, and dispose on all available seats so enormous a quantity of books, parasols, cloaks, rugs and handbags, that the question whether all these seats were taken could scarcely be ventured on, so heavily and potently were they occupied. Consequently on the next afternoon Charles found her already in possession, with the windows tightly shut, and a perfect bale of morning and evening papers by her. She had bought in fact a copy of every paper published that day, as far as she could ascertain, with the object of utterly overwhelming Philip

with all the first notices of the Academy, in order to impress him as by a demonstration in force, with Charles' immensity. She had attempted to read some of these herself, but being unused to artistic jargon, had made very little of them. Still there could be no doubt as to what they meant to convey.

"That's right, my dear," she said as he appeared, "and jump in quick, for though there's time yet, you never can tell when they won't slide you out of the station. Clear a place for yourself, and then we'll both sit and look out of the window, and they'll take us for a couple on their honeymoon, and not dream of coming in, if they've any sense of what's right. And when we've started you can read all about yourself, and it's likely you'll find a lot you didn't know before. I can't make head or tail of it all: they talk of keys of colour and tones and what not, as if you'd been writing a bundle of music. And leit-motif: what's a leit-motif? They'll say your pictures are nothing but a lot of accidentals next. Chords and harmonies indeed, as if you'd put a musical-box in the frames. There's that Craddock got a column and a half about your keys and what not. But I was so pleased yesterday I had to pass the time of day with him."

"But what have you bought all these papers for?" asked Charles. "Oh, yes: here's Craddock."

"Don't you mind him. Why to let Philip see what they all think of you. But that's my affair, my dear. I'm going to stuff them under his nose one after the other. You'll see. And there we are off. Now don't expect me to talk in the train. You just read about yourself, and if you see me nodding, let me nod. There's half an hour yet before we need be thinking of putting my things together."

Great heat had come with the opening of May, and spring was riotous in field and hedgerow, with glory of early blossom and valour of young leafage. All this last month Charles had been town-tied among the unchanging bloomlessness of brick and stone and pavement—it had scarcely seemed to him that winter was overpast, and the time for buds and birds had come. Already on the lawn by the water-side the summer-batswing tent had been set up, and across the grass Joyce and the unbrothered Huz came to meet them, with a smile and a tail of welcome. A faint smell of eucalyptus had been apparent as they passed through the house and Lady Crowborough drew an unerring conclusion.

"Well, Joyce, my dear, here we are," she said, "and I won't ask after your father because I'll bet that he has got a cold. I smelt his stuff the moment I set foot in the house."

"Yes, darling grannie," said Joyce, "but it's not very bad. He's really more afraid of having one than—than it. How are you, Mr. Lathom?"

Lady Crowborough's maid was standing a little way behind, looking like Tweedledum prepared for battle, so encompassed was she by a mass of miscellaneous objects. Prominent among them was the file of to-day's papers.

"You'll find out how he is, my dear," said Lady Crowborough, "when you've dipped into that little lot. He's just a grand piano of keys and harmonies."

"Ah, I read the notice in the 'Daily Review,'" said Joyce. "I was so pleased. I long to see your pictures."

"Well, then, you'll have to wait your turn, my dear," said Lady Crowborough. "We all took our turns like a peep-show. Drat that dog; he's always licking my hand. Now take me and give me my tea at once, and then he'll get something else to lick. Are we to see your father?"

"Yes, he's coming down to dinner, if he feels up to it. Shall we have tea in the tent?"

"Well, it ain't so cold for the country!" said Lady Crowborough, as if the Arctic region began at the four mile radius.

"It's broiling, Grannie. And do you want quite all those cushions and wraps? They'll hardly go into the tent."

"Yes, I want them every one. And I want my tea after my journey. Go back to the house, Charles, my dear, and tell them to bring it out."

She waited till Charles had passed beyond earshot on his errand. "Now, Joyce," she said, "I don't want to see any fiddle-faddling between that boy and you, and talking about the moon and the stars and Mr. Browning's poetry and what not, as if that had anything to do with it."

"Grannie, darling," said Joyce with an agonized look at Tweedledum.

"She don't hear," said Lady Crowborough, "who could hear through that lot of cushions and veils. And what I say to you, Joyce, I'm going to say to him."

Joyce grew suddenly grave.

"Oh, indeed, you mustn't do anything of the kind, Grannie," said she. "Why how could I look him in the face, and have a moment's ease with him, if I thought you had?"

Lady Crowborough's face smiled all over.

"Very well, then," she said. "I don't want you not to look at the face. But you take my advice, Joyce. Lord, if I were seventy years younger I'd take it myself, in less than a jiffy. You make up your mind you're going to have him and let there be no nonsense about it. Mercy on us all, girls get red in the face and look away, and think one's a shocking old woman, when one advises them to do exactly what they want to do. You keep all the stuff about the moon and poetry till afterwards, my dear. It'll serve to talk about then, only I expect you'll find you've plenty else to say. He's a nice clean clever young fellow, with a good head and a good heart, and they're not too many of that sort going about. Lord, you should have seen all the girls and women, too, staring at

him yesterday at the picture-show. I thought somebody would catch him up and marry him under my very nose. They'll be at him now like wasps round a jam-pot. But you get in first, my dear, and we'll put the lid on. Well, here he comes! Don't you look shocked. I've talked very good sense. You haven't got a mother, but if you had she'd tell you just the same, with no end of beautiful words scattered about like the flowers on a dinner-table, just to hide the victuals as she always did. But the victuals are there just the same: it wouldn't be much of a dinner without 'em."

Any intercourse, flippant or nugatory, or concerned with what Lady Crowborough summed up under the head of the "moon and Mr. Browning's poetry" is sufficient cover for the hidden approach of two souls that are stealing towards each other; any channel sufficient to conduct the conveyance of such streams; and when not long after, Lady Crowborough left them to go indoors to make her salutations to Philip, and get out of the "nasty damp draught" that was blowing up from the river, it was under the most insignificant of shelter that they crept nearer, ever nearer. But, for they talked over the happenings little and not so little, that concerned them jointly in the past, it was as if they gathered in the store that should so soon burst the doors of its granary, or sat telling their beads in some hushed sacred place before it blazed out into lights and music and banners.... All this was below, as leaven secretly working, on the surface a boy and girl by the Thames-side talked as comrades talk with laughter and unembarrassed pauses.

"Wonder if it'll be a June like last year," said Charles, sliding from his chair onto the grass. "I was camped up there, half a mile away, for three weeks of it and there was never a drop of rain. Oh, except one night for half an hour: it smelt so good."

"I know: the best watering carts in a dusty street," said she. "You were doing that picture of the weir and your brother."

"And then one afternoon you punted up with Craddock. And that's how it all began."

"All what?" asked Joyce, knowing he could give only one answer, but longing for the other answer.

"My career, large C," said Charles with pomp. "He came and bought the picture next morning. I couldn't believe it at first. I thought—I thought he was a fairy."

"Mr. Craddock does not answer my idea of a fairy," said Joyce after a little consideration. "Oh, you left out about Reggie—isn't he Reggie?—trying to make an omelette, and succeeding only in producing a degraded glue."

"I don't think I noticed that," said Charles, looking at her.

"No, you were staring at us as if we were all fairies. Oh, but you did notice it. It made you laugh, and me too."

Charles went back to a previous topic.

"No, strictly speaking, he isn't a fairy," he said. "At least not completely. But it was a fairylike proceeding. Oh, yes, grant him something fairylike. He got me the commission to copy your Reynolds, and he started me on my feet, and believed in me. I found him a fairy for—for quite a long time."

"Of course there are bad fairies as well," said Joyce, conceding the point.

"Yes: do you mind my asking you one thing? Did you ever——"

"Of course not," said Joyce. "What on earth do you think of me?"

"But you don't know what——"

"Yes, I do. I never, *never* believed one word. Does that show you? Talk about something else. I don't want to be sick on such a lovely evening."

Charles relapsed into laughter.

"Isn't it so distressing on a wet day?" he asked.

"No. Do you know, I think what he did to father about the picture wasn't nearly so bad. That only made me feel rather unwell. Have you seen him since you knew about it all?"

Charles made a little conflagration of dry leaves with the match he had just lit before he answered.

"Yes, once or twice," he said. "I'm rather ashamed of not having seen him oftener. I believe he was sorry, and if people are sorry—well, it's all over, isn't it?"

"What a painfully noble sentiment," said Joyce. "But I don't think I should caress a scorpion, however grief-stricken. Besides, how can you say that it's all over, just because a person is sorry. He has become, to you, a different person if you find out he has done something mean, something—something like that. Not that I thought very much of Mr. Craddock before," she added.

"Well, I did," said Charles.

"Don't bias me," said Joyce.

She was silent a moment.

"In a way an injury done to oneself is easier to forgive than an injury done to somebody else——"

she began.

Charles rudely interrupted.

"Painfully noble sentiment?" he enquired.

"Yes: perhaps it was. Let us be careful: we might die in the night if we became more edifying."

"And the real point is that Mr. Craddock's little plot didn't come off," said he. "At least that seems to me the most important thing."

For a moment their eyes met, and for that moment the huge underlying reality came close to the surface.

She smiled and nodded her assent to this.

"Leave it there," she said ... "and then, where were we? O, yes: then you came to copy the Reynolds. Up in my room, do you remember? And dear old Buz lay on the sofa and got worse and worse?"

She leaned back in her chair so that he could not see her face.

"Oh, what a coward I was!" she said. "I knew there was only one thing I could do for him, poor darling, and yet I let you do it instead of me."

"Well, there was no delay," said Charles. "It was done."

"Oh, but you understand better than that," she said. "It was I who failed: now that's a thing hard to forgive oneself. I loved Buz best: it was my privilege to help him in the only way possible. Yes, I know, the thing in itself was nothing, just to press a syringe. But there was the principle behind it, don't you see—of course you do—that I threw love's right away.... And I don't believe I ever thanked you for picking it up, so to speak. But I was grateful."

Charles' little conflagration had burned itself out.

"Poor Buz!" he said.

Joyce sat up.

"He didn't have such a bad time," she said, "though why I expect you to be interested in Buz I really don't know. But I've confessed. I always rather wanted to confess that to you—Penance?"

"I think a turn in the punt might do you good," said he, "especially if I take the pole."

That, for the present, was the end of anything serious. Charles exhibited the most complicated incompetence, as regards propulsion, though as a piece of aquatic juggling, his performance was supreme. Joyce told him how to stand, and like that he stood, and the juggling began. He thrust his pole into the water and it stuck fast: he pulled hard at it and the punt went a little backwards, but a second wrench landed a chunk of mud and water-weed on his trousers. He pushed again, this time with so firm and vigorous a stroke that they flew into mid-stream, and only by swift antic steps in the direction of the stern did he recover balance and pole. Once again he pushed, this time in unfathomable water, plunged his arm up to the shoulder in the astonished flood, and fell in an entangled heap of arms and legs on the top of the stupefied Huz.

"Are we going up or down the river?" asked Joyce.

Charles looked wildly round: the bows of the punt seemed if anything to be pointing down stream.

"Down," he said.

The punt thought not: it yawed in a slow half circle and directed itself up-stream.

"That is down-stream, isn't it?" said he ... and they slowly slid into the bank.

A swift circular motion began, and a fool-hardy swan coming within range narrowly escaped decapitation. Then Lady Crowborough, having made her visit, appeared at the edge of the lawn, and Charles rashly promised to pick her up.... But they moved westward instead into the crimson pools of reflected sunset. Joyce had never ached so much in all her healthy life.

Yet even these inanities brought them nearer.... Love has a use for laughter.

Six months ago on an evening of gale and autumn storm, when the chimneys smoked and the rain made fierce tattoo on the streaming window panes, Joyce had gone up to her bedroom leaving her father and another guest together, and had felt some wild primæval instinct stirring in her blood, that made her long to go out alone into the blackness and hurly-burly of the streaming heavens, to be herself, solitary and unencumbered by the presence and subtle silent influence of others. And to-night, when she and Lady Crowborough left Philip and Charles talking together—Philip's cold had miraculously almost, encouraged by eucalyptus, vanished altogether—she again felt herself prey to the same desire. But to-night, it was no pall of streaming blackness that drew her, but the still starry twilight, and the warm scents of spring. But now, even as then, she wanted to be alone, hidden and unsuspected in the deep dusk of the star-shine, to wander through the fresh-fallen dew in the meadows, to finger the new leaves on riverside willows, to lie,

perhaps face downwards in the growing hay-fields, to listen to the mysterious noises of the night, to learn—to learn what? She did not know, or at any rate did not formulate the answer, but it was something that the dark and the spring-time were ready to tell her: something that concerned the Spirit of life that kept the world spinning on its secular journey, and made bright the eyes of the wild creatures of the wood, and set the rose a-budding, and made in her the red blood leap on its joyous errands.... Surely, somehow, in the dark of the spring night she could link the pulse that beat in her with the great indwelling rhythm of the world, make herself realise that all was one, she and the singing-bird whose time was come, and the rose that tingled on its stem with the potential blossoms.

She had taken off her dinner-dress and put on a dressing gown, and now, blowing out her light, she went across to her open window, drew up the blind and leaned out into the night. And then in a flash of newly-awakened knowledge, she was aware that she wanted to be alone no longer. She wanted a teacher who also would learn with her, one more human than the star-light, and dearer to her heart than the fragrant hay-fields. But leaning out into the dark, she was nearer him than in the house, and she opened her heart ... it stood wide.

Just below her the gravel path that bordered the lawn was illuminated by the light that came in yellow oblongs of glow from the long windows of her father's study. She heard some little stir of movement below, the sound of voices dim and unintelligible inside, and presently after the tread of a foot-step on the stairs and so along the passage past her room, where her father slept. Then the window below was thrown open and Charles stepped out onto the gravel. Like her, perhaps, he felt the call of the night; she wondered if, like her, he needed more than the night could give him. She could look out without risk of detection: from outside, her window would appear a mere black hole in the wall. He paused a moment, and then strolled onto the dewy lawn. And as he walked away towards the river, she heard him whistle softly to himself, the song he had sung last year to his guitar. "See the chariot at hand here of Love...."

Joyce lay long awake, when she got to bed, not tossing nor turning nor even desiring sleep, but very quiet with wide open eyes. She did not seem to herself to be thinking at all, it was no preoccupation that kept her awake: she but lived and breathed, was part of the spring night. But it seemed to her that she had never been alive till then. Sometimes for a little while she dozed, nonsense of some sort began to stir in her brain, but the drowsy moments were no more than moments. From the stable-clock not far away she heard the faint clanging of the hours and half-hours, which seemed to follow very rapidly, the one after the other. By her dressing-table in the window there came a very faint light through the unblinded casement from the remote noon-day of the shining stars, the rest of the room was muffled in soft darkness.

Then she missed the sound of one half-hour, and when she woke again, the light in her room was changed. Already the faint illumination by the window had spread over the rest of it, and there was a more conspicuous brightness on the table that stood there. Then from outside she heard the first chirruping of one bird, and the light grew, a light hueless and colourless, a mere mixture of white with the dark. More birds joined voices to the first heard in the earliest welcome of the day, and a breeze set some tendril of creeper tapping at her panes. Colour began to steal into the hueless light; she could guess there in the East were cloud-wisps that caught the morning.

Joyce got out of bed and went to the window, and the lure of the sunrise irresistibly beckoned her out. The message the night had seemed to hold for her, though contradicted afterwards, had been authentically transmitted to the dawn—something certainly called her now. She dressed herself quickly in some old boating-costume, went quietly along the passage, and down stairs. At the foot Huz was sleeping, but awoke at her step, and found it necessary to give a loud and joyful bark of welcome. It seemed to him an excellent plan to go out.

She crossed the lawn with her dog, for the river seemed to beckon, and would have taken her canoe, except that that meant that Huz must be left behind. She did not want Huz, but Huz wanted, and she stepped into the punt, that puzzled victim of Charles' aimlessness, and pushed off. The boom of Thorley Weir—that, or was it something else about Thorley Weir—determined her direction, and she slid away upstream. It was still not yet the hour of sunrise, and she would be at the weir before that.

A few minutes before, Charles had wakened also. He, too, had slept but little, and his awaking was sudden: he felt as if some noise had roused him, the shutting of a door perhaps, or the barking of a dog. The early light that preceded dawn was leaking into his room, and he got out of bed to draw up the blind. The magic of the hour, breeze of morning, chirruping of birds seized and held him, and into his mind—brighter than the approaching dawn—there came flooding back all that had kept sleep from him. Sleep was far away again now, and the morning beckoned.

He dressed and went out, and it was in his mind to wrestle with the punt, perhaps, to spring on Joyce a mysteriously-acquired adeptness. And then suddenly he saw that steps had preceded him across the lawn, wiping away the dew, and his heart leaped. Could it be she who had passed that

way already? Would they meet—and his heart hammered in his throat—in this pearly and sacred hour, when only the birds were awake? It was not quite sunrise yet; should day, and another day lit by the dawn that from everlasting had moved the sun and the stars, dawn together? But where had she gone, where should he seek and find her?

The punt was gone: the canoe lay tapped by the ripples from the mill-stream. Right or left? Down stream or up? Then the boom of Thorley Weir decided him—that, or something else, some quivering line that she had left to guide him.

The imperfect chirrupings were forming themselves into "actual song"; on the smooth-flowing river reflections of the blue above began to stain the grey steel-colour, and the willow leaves were a-quiver with the breeze of morning. He hardly noticed these things as he plied his paddle round bend and promontory of the stream. Louder sounded the boom of the outpoured weir, and the last corner was turned, and on the spit of land where a year ago his tent had been pitched stood Joyce.

She had just tied her punt to the bank and stood looking up towards the weir itself. Huz was by her and hearing the splash of the paddle, turned and waved a welcoming tail that beat against Joyce's skirt. At that she turned also, and saw him. But she gave him no word of welcome, nor did he speak to her. In silence he ran the boat into the soft ground beside the punt, and stepped ashore. He had left his coat in the canoe and came towards her, hatless like herself, bare-armed to the elbow.

She looked at him, still silent, yet flooding him with her self, and his own identity, his very self and being, seemed to pass utterly away from him. He was conscious of nothing more than her.

"It had to be like this," he said.... "Joyce, Joyce."

Still she did not answer, but, quivering a little, bent towards him, as a young tree leans before the wind. Then her lips parted.

"Oh, Charles," she said, "have you come to me? I was waiting for you."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THORLEY WEIR ***

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